

The Apostles' Creed: I Believe in God the Father Almighty

Acts 17:22-31

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Acts 17, and we'll go back to last week's passage that illustrates the scriptural teaching of our belief in God. We're going to read this passage to emphasize two more things that Paul brings out. Someone asked me what the term *creed* means, where the term comes from. As we're studying through The Apostles' Creed, that's a perfectly reasonable question to ask. The word *creed* comes from the Latin *credo*, which is the first word of The Apostles' Creed in Latin, and means *I believe*. So, a creed signifies a brief, summary statement of that which we believe as Christians, that which we believe as the Church. I want to begin thinking on the phrase of the creed that is before us today, I believe in God the Father almighty, by turning again to Acts 17, in order to highlight two assertions of the Apostle Paul. The first is that God is Father. Now, Paul makes that assertion by stating the corresponding truth that we are all His children. Secondly, that God is almighty. Paul stresses that in this passage by calling God the Lord of heaven and earth. So, let's hear God's holy word in Acts 17, beginning in verse 22:

So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has

appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, we bless You for Your Word. We ask that by Your Holy Spirit You would open our eyes to understand it; that You would grant us the faith to believe it and by Your Spirit You would enable us to walk in that belief. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

This little phrase "the Father Almighty" gives us at least four grand and important and comforting, if you are a Christian, spiritual truths to meditate on. They are biblical truths; truths which can be substantiated from Scripture, truths which are drawn from Scripture, and I'd like to look at those four truths in these three little words "the Father Almighty" this morning for a few moments. Let me tell you what those truths are. We learn from the phrase "I believe in God the Father Almighty" first that God is Trinity. Secondly, we learn from this phrase that God is Creator and we're obligated to Him. Third, we learn that God is Redeemer, and fourth, we learn that the Father God is sovereign. I want to look at each of these things with you for a few moments this morning and show you these truths from Scripture, not just from the creed.

I. When the Creed speaks of God the Father it is reminding us of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Let me ask you to turn to John 5 and we'll begin to look at the truth of God as Trinity. When the creed speaks of God the father, it is deliberately reminding us of the doctrine of the Trinity. The first thing that we learn from "I believe in God the Father" is that there is Trinitarian fatherhood in God. God the Father is Father not simply by virtue of His creation of us and of the world, but He is eternally Father because of His eternal Son. And this point is made in John 5:18. The Jews are responding with anger to Jesus because He has made some rather astounding claims about Himself and we read this. "For this reason therefore, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He was calling God His own Father and making Himself equal with God."

Now, by the way, friends, that's all you need, hat one little verse, to have the rudiments of the doctrine of the Trinity, and to have a belief in one God and to have the belief that Jesus is divine and is the divine son of the Father. You have all you need to begin building the rudiments of the doctrine of the Trinity and in fact, the same thing is true of what is said in the creed. When you say, "I believe in God the Father" you have already begun to utter the doctrine of the Trinity. Why do I say that? For a very simple reason. When you say that God is one, and then you add to it the assertion that God is Father, and you mean that He is not

simply Father of what He makes or Father of creation but that He is eternally Father, it requires, if God is to be eternally the Father, that there must be eternally the Son. And since there is nothing other than God eternally, then within God there must be Father and Son. And so all you have to assert is that God is one and that God is Father, to begin to build the doctrine of the Trinity. The data of Scripture force that particular conclusion upon us. If God is Father and God is unchangeable and God is love, then there must be a Trinity. If God exists eternally, how can God be love eternally before the world exists unless He has something else to love?

A lot of people will say that God created the world so that He would have something to love. The Bible says "Wrong." Before the world began, God was already involved in a love relationship. But that relationship existed between the persons of the Trinity—the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Spirit, the Spirit loving the Father. And the gospel of John celebrates this repeatedly in chapter 1 verses 1-18. If you wanted to develop all the components necessary for the doctrine of the Trinity, you couldn't find a better passage than John 1:1-18. It starts you right from the very beginning. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was towards God and the Word was God." You've got everything you need there for the doctrine of the Trinity.

But I'd like to draw your attention to John 1:18 where it says of Jesus, whom John has identified as the Word, "No one has seen God at anytime. The only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him." Notice how Jesus the Word is called the only begotten God, not just the only begotten Son, but also the only begotten God. In other words, Jesus is divine. And yet, He is in relationship as Son to Father with God. This fact again forces the biblical doctrine of the Trinity on us.

The Trinity is not a traditional doctrine *invented* by the councils of men--say the Council of Nicea in 325 or the Council of Constantinople in 381. It is a doctrine that is forced on you by doing justice to the biblical text. Not only those texts which describe Jesus' relationship to God and Jesus' claims about His own deity, but those texts which express the work of God in redemption, stressing the Father sending the Son and the Son coming. When Jesus prays to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, is Jesus praying to Himself? Well, the very fact that Jesus is addressing Himself to the heavenly Father testifies to the doctrine of the Trinity. And when the Creed says, "I believe in God the Father" it's beginning—it's not finished—but it's *beginning* to express Christian belief in the doctrine of the Trinity. It is the Trinitarian fatherhood, and the Creed will talk about the Son and the Holy Spirit later on. Even when it says "I believe in God the Father" it is affirming that God is Trinity and it is only because God is triune that He is eternally and essentially the God of love, because He doesn't need anything outside Himself in order to express His heart of love. Everything there, in the relationship that He enjoys eternally, allows Him to express that love. As J.I. Packer says, "Within the eternal Trinity, there is a family relation of Father and

son, and in that relation God's love is expressed." So there's the first thing that the creed is saying, that God is Trinity.

II. When the Creed speaks of God the Father it reminds us that he is the Creator and that we are accountable.

But there 's another thing. I believe in God the Father also stresses that God is a creational Father. It's speaking of the creational fatherhood of God. God is the Father of all of us by virtue of His act of creation. Turn back to Psalm 100:3. When the Apostles' Creed speaks of God the Father, it is reminding us that He is the Creator, and because He is the Creator, we are all accountable to Him even as children are accountable to their father. Of course, when we say that God is the Father and God is the Creator, we are drawing attention to the Creator/creature distinction, but here in Psalm 100:3, we learn something more: "Know that the Lord Himself is God, it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture." Now, that's a glorious passage. It draws a distinction between god and His creation. God is not part of His creation, He is not infused into His creation, His creation has come from Him, He originated it and He is over it. That's being celebrated in Psalm 100.

But Psalm 100:3 is also setting forth the first principle of theology: He is God and you are not. And that's one of the most important lessons you could ever know. Notice how it puts it: "It is He who has made us and we are His." Or as one of the older versions says, "It is He who has made us and not we ourselves." That distinction between God and that which He has created is made very clear.

This creational fatherhood is stressed in the Bible, not to say that all people are saved, not to say that all people are believers, not to say that God relates to all people without distinction, but in fact, this doctrine of God as Father of all is used in the Bible to stress our obligation to God. The Unitarians teach that God is the Father of all human beings, that we are all in a saving relation to God, there are many ways into fellowship with God, Jesus is not necessary for salvation. may be a good example, but He's just one of many ways to express one's loyalty to God.

There's an old joke that says, "The Unitarians believe in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston," because the belief originated from the New England intelligentsia. But, it is that belief that is actually pervasive in the pluralistic culture of our own time, and interestingly, it is precisely that belief that was behind the text of Van Dyke's hymn, "Joyful, joyful we adore Thee." That's one reason why that hymn isn't in all Protestant, evangelical hymnals, because when it says, "God our Father, Christ our brother, all who live in love are Thine," it is asserting that all mankind sustains the same kind of child-Father relation to the heavenly Father, apart from trust in Jesus Christ. He may be our brother, but He's not necessary to atone for our sins. And so, when we

turn to passages like Malachi 2:10, we find a correction to that wrong belief. The fatherhood of God is actually a scary doctrine for those who are not trusting in Christ. Turn to Malachi 2:10, last book of the Old Testament, where Malachi asks, "Do we not all have one father, has not one God created us?" Often times, that phrase is used to prove that we are all brothers and sisters, we are all alike, and we ought to love one another and get along. But, notice what Malachi is quoting it for: "Do we not all have one father, has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each with his brother so to profane the covenant of our fathers?" Do you see the way Malachi is using it? He's saying, "Since God is our Father by virtue of creating us, how dare we abuse those that He has created. How dare we sins against them." He's using the doctrine of God's fatherhood to hold us accountable to Him.

In other words, for those who are not trusting in god, for those who are not obedient to God, the doctrine of God's fatherhood is scary, it's the worst possible news you can find out if you're not trusting in God through Jesus Christ, that He is the Father and He will hold you accountable. The doctrine of the fatherhood of God is the worst possible news you could ever learn if you're not trusting in the Son of God for salvation. You see, if we are all obligated to God, and if we've all rebelled against God, and Jesus is God's way of safety, then announcing that He is the Father of those who rejected Him and those who do not believe in His Son, is a frightening announcement, because He will hold them accountable. And that is how this truth is used in the word of god. But the creed is reminding us that God is the creational father, in the sense that we are all obligated to Him because He made us.

III. When the Creed speaks of God the Father, it reminds us of His grace-relationship to us through Christ.

Thirdly, the Creed is speaking to us of the redemptive fatherhood of God. Not only is God a Trinitarian Father, not only is God a Creational father, but God is a Redemptive father. When the Creed speaks of God the father, it is reminding us of the grace relationship to us through Jesus Christ.

Turn to Ephesians 1:3, where we read, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in love predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself." That, my friends, is the first good news regarding God's fatherhood to be heard by fallen humans. The judge, the creator who made us, the one who holds us to account, and the one who has every right to punish us for our sins, has in His mercy, adopted us into His family through Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ, the Father, Creator and Judge becomes our Father, Redeemer, Adopter, and that is the best possible news that you could ever hear. If it's bad news for the sinner to find out that God is his Creator, and that he's accountable to Him, then it is great news to find out that the Father-Creator is also the Father-Redeemer, and the New Testament teaches that the believing

sinner is adopted by the Father, through the Son, and sealed by the Spirit, into family membership with God.

Turn to John 1:12, where John says this about Jesus, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." That verse alone proves that not all humans are children of God in this special, saving sense. That's a gift of grace. To those who trust in Christ, He gives the right for them to be called the children, the sons, the daughters of God. And that's why the Apostle Paul, in Romans 8;15, can say to Christians, "You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'" You've received that, you don't have that by nature, you don't have that inherently, you're not inherently able to approach the God, the Creator, the Judge of the world and say, "Father, Abba, hear me." But you receive that as a gift of grace, that's something that is given in God's redeeming, adoptive mercy.

Picture this: a man has committed a horrendous crime, a crime that demands the death penalty. A judge knowing his guilt, acquits him by giving his own son to bear the death penalty in his place, and upon his public acquittal, he stands to publicly announce that he has adopted the criminal as one of his own children. That is an inkling of the picture of what God the Creator, who is God the redeemer father, does when He adopts us into His family.. It is God's expressed intention, that we as His redeemed children, participate in the love relationship expressed in His inter-trinitarian life. This exceedingly great privilege of calling God, "Father, Abba," is witness to that grand design and reality of God's redeeming work.

That's why Packer can say, "When the Christian says the first clause of the creed, he puts all this together and confesses his Creator as both the Father of his Savior and his own Father through Christ. A Father who now loves him no less that He loves His only begotten Son. That is a marvelous confession to be able to make." And that's what we're standing up and saying that we believe, when we confess the Apostles' Creed. And I want to say that it's so marvelous, that if Jesus Himself didn't teach it in John 17, we would suspect it to be blasphemy, that the Father loves us as His children, no less than He loves His only begotten Son, and the Son desires us to participate in the love that He and the Father have shared from the foundation of the world. You are confessing that when you say, "I believe in God, the Father. He's my Father by grace, and he loves me as His own Son."

IV. When the Creed speaks of God the Father Almighty it is stressing God's sovereignty.

But we're not done. We've talked about God as Trinity, we've talked about God as the creator father, we've talked about God as the redeeming Father, the adopting Father, but when we say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty," we're

also saying that we believe in the sovereign Father. We're saying that the Father is sovereign. We're talking about His sovereign fatherhood. God rules the world for the good of His children. Turn with me to Romans 8:28. I know you've memorized it, but let's look at it. When the Creed speaks of God the Father almighty, it is stressing God's sovereignty, "And we know," Paul says, "that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." And God can only do that because He is sovereign, because He is almighty.

We need to say four things about God's sovereignty:

First, there are things God can't do: anything that is self-contradictory; against His character; He can't be capricious, unloving, random, unjust, inconsistent; He can't fail.

Second, God's sovereignty doesn't make us robots: God's power is not limited by free will, but this does not mean that we can't or don't do what we want to do, or that our spontaneous and responsible choice is an illusion.

Three, God's sovereignty is not undermined by the problem of evil. The existence of evil proves the absolute, transcendent moral distinction between good and evil, a distinction which cannot be sustained in an atheistic universe. The Bible makes clear that God is warring against and will triumph over evil in this moral universe. The Bible also teaches that when we encounter the contradiction of evil in this world, we are to trust in God, lean not to our own understanding, recognize the human source of evil, and consider the evil of our own hearts, rather than "blaming" God.

And fourth, God's sovereignty is the ground of our hope and comfort in a fallen world.

The truth of God's almightiness is one of the most comforting truths that a believer can contemplate. It is the ground, in fact, of all our hopes. This ascription in the Creed, of *almighty*, to God, is designed to stress God's all-ruling providence, and that is why Paul is talking about in Romans 8:28. "He causes all things to work together for your good." He rules the world, for the sake of His children, and we need to understand that we cannot rightly understand God at any point if we do not understand His sovereignty. Sovereignty is something that normally we argue about, and that's a shame. Because it is one of the most comforting doctrines in all of God's word. God's sovereignty is the ground of our hope and comfort in a fallen world. Think of the answer to the first question of *The Heidelberg Catechism*: "What is your only comfort in life and death?" Do you remember how the Catechism answers that? "My only comfort in life and death is that I with body and soul am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for my sins and delivered me from the power of the devil and so preserves me that apart from the will of

His Father in heaven, not a hair of my head can fall.” That's God's almightiness, that's God's sovereign providence, so that not a hair of your head can fall, apart from the will of the heavenly Father. That's comforting, that's comforting in a world in which we encounter evil all the time.

Take your hymnals and turn to number 111. This is another hymn you've been singing since you were five years old in Vacation Bible School, and you probably know it by heart. “This is my Father's world.” But look at the third stanza, because Maltbie Babcock, the Presbyterian minister who wrote this hymn, is singing of this very truth, of the comfort of God's almightiness, the comfort of His sovereignty, when he says in the third stanza, “This is my Father's world, o let me never forget, that though the wrong seems off so strong, God is the ruler yet.” Now, your stanza goes on to read, “This is my Father's world, the battle is not done, Jesus who died shall be satisfied and earth and heaven be one.” And so it says, that even though we see wrong in the world, Jesus is going to be satisfied and He's going to bring an end to it. I think that Babcock actually wrote the rest of that stanza like this: “this is my Father's world, why should my heart be sad, the Lord is King, let the heavens ring, God reigns, let the earth be glad.” It comes right out of the psalms, doesn't it. You see, it's the fact that God is sovereign that causes him to sing, even in spite of evil, because evil doesn't disprove God's sovereignty, evil is the foil by which God displays His sovereignty. It doesn't call into question whether God is in control, it gives Him the concrete opportunity to display His dominion over all things for the sake of His people, and that is one of the most comforting things in the world.

There's a passage in Calvin's *Institutes* in which, if you didn't know it, would cause you to think that Calvin was a paranoid schizophrenic. This is what he says:

10. *Without certainty about God's providence life would be unbearable*

Here we are forcibly reminded of the inestimable felicity of a pious mind. Innumerable are the ills which beset human life, and present death in as many different forms. Not to go beyond ourselves, since the body is a receptacle, nay the nurse, of a thousand diseases, a man cannot move without carrying along with him many forms of destruction. His life is in a manner interwoven with death. For what else can be said where heat and cold bring equal danger? Then, in what direction soever you turn, all surrounding objects not only may do harm, but almost openly threaten and seem to present immediate death. Go on board a ship, you are but a plank's breadth from death. Mount a horse, the stumbling of a foot endangers your life. Walk along the streets, every tile upon the roofs is a source of danger. If a sharp instrument is in your own hand, or that of a friend, the possible harm is manifest. All the savage beasts you see are so many beings armed for your destruction. Even within a high walled garden, where everything ministers to delight, a serpent will sometimes lurk. Your house, constantly exposed to fire, threatens you with poverty by day, with destruction by night. Your

fields, subject to hail, mildew, drought, and other injuries, denounce barrenness, and thereby famine. I say nothing of poison, treachery, robbery, some of which beset us at home, others follow us abroad. Amid these perils, must not man be very miserable, as one who, more dead than alive, with difficulty draws an anxious and feeble breath, just as if a drawn sword were constantly suspended over his neck?

It may be said that these things happen seldom, at least not always, or to all, certainly never all at once. I admit it; but since we are reminded by the example of others, that they may also happen to us, and that our life is not an exception any more than theirs, it is impossible not to fear and dread as if they were to befall us. What can you imagine more grievous than such trepidation? Add that there is something like an insult to God when it is said, that man, the noblest of the creatures, stands exposed to every blind and random stroke of fortune. Here, however, we were only referring to the misery which man should feel, were he placed under the dominion of chance.

11. *Certainty about God's providence puts joyous trust toward God in our hearts*

But when once the light of Divine Providence has illumined the believer's soul, he is relieved and set free, not only from the extreme fear and anxiety which formerly oppressed him, but from all care. For as he justly shudders at the idea of chance, so he can confidently commit himself to God. This, I say, is his comfort, that his heavenly Father so embraces all things under his power - so governs them at will by his nod - so regulates them by his wisdom, that nothing takes place save according to his appointment; that received into his favour, and entrusted to the care of his angels neither fire, nor water, nor sword, can do him harm, except in so far as God their master is pleased to permit. For thus sings the Psalm, "Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust; his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday" &c. (Ps. 91: 2-6.) (*Institutes*, Book 1, Chpt 17)

Because God is almighty, we need fear nothing. And because God is almighty, even the pain that we experience in this life He will conquer and use to bring about His good purposes.

The Father is sovereign and because of that we can believe in a God who is almighty and have peace in a fallen world. Now we know that; let's believe it and live like it. Let's pray.

O Father, You are sovereign and that truth is the charter of our freedom. Grant us faith to trust and believe, in Jesus' name, Amen.

A Guide to the Morning Service

The Worship of God

We worship God because God created us to worship him. Worship is at the center of our existence, at the heart of our reason for being. God created us to be his image—an image that would reflect his glory. In fact, the whole creation was brought into existence to reflect the divine glory. The psalmist tells us that ‘the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork’ (Psalm 19:1). The apostle Paul in the prayer with which he begins the epistle to the Ephesians makes it clear that God created us to praise him.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace . . . (Eph. 1:3-6)

This prayer says much about the worship of the earliest Christians. It shows the consciousness that the first Christians had of the ultimate significance of their worship. They understood themselves to have been destined and appointed to live to the praise of God's glory (Eph. 1:12). (Hughes Old)

Sermon Series on the Apostles' Creed

Dr. Duncan and Dr. Thomas are leading us through a unique survey of this ancient confession of Christian belief. Our study will: (1) *Anchor the specific assertions of the Creed in text of the Scriptures* – so you can see that the Bible really teaches these truths. (2) *Address contemporary deterrents to belief* – so you can stand against current cultural impediments to belief. (3) *Affirm Christian confidence in biblical truth* – so you can embrace the truth despite modern skepticism. (4) *Arrest Christian defection from the biblical truth* – so you can respond to false teaching that often goes under the name “Christian.” (5) *Apply the truth to specific issues in the Christian life* – so you can learn how good theology serves to lead to the good life.

The Reading of Scripture

We continue reading through the Book of Acts in our morning services. Today, our passage is Acts 2:1-21 which contains an account of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The Psalms and Hymns Praise to the Lord, the Almighty (Psalms 103 and 150)

A favorite of our congregation's. The song's author was Joachim Neander, the grandson of a musician and the son of a teacher. He studied theology at Frankfurt, where (at the age of 23) he met the great German Pietistic scholars Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) and Johann Jakob Schütz (1640-1690). Neander died at the young age of 30, perhaps of the plague, having served in his short life as a school principal and as a minister. He wrote this hymn when he was 20.

Gloria Patri

The "Gloria Patri" ("Glory to the Father") is an ancient hymn of praise to the Triune God. It probably dates back to the second century. Today, we sing it in response to the word of God read in the New Testament scripture. By the way, when we sing "as *it* was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end" the "it" refers to the Holy Trinity. This is a bold affirmation of the eternity of God.

Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

This hymn is based, in part, on 1 Timothy 1:17 ("Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.") and Psalm 104:2 ("He [God] wraps himself in light as with a garment . . .").

O Father, You Are Sovereign

This Margaret Clarkson hymn is powerful. She knew great pain in her own life and yet continued to trust in her sovereign and loving Father-God. There is, thus, enormous pathos in her praise to God as "the Lord of human pain" (see stanza 3). The tune is well-known to all, "St. Theodulph" (to which we often sing "All Glory, Laud and Honor."

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the

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