

The Doctrine of God

Credo: Truths That Shape a Christian Life Sermon 1

Psalm 99

January 19, 2020

A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

- 1** The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
 - 2** The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.
 - 3** Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he!
 - 4** The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.
 - 5** Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he!
 - 6** Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel was among those who called upon his name. They called to the LORD, and he answered them.
 - 7** In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them; they kept his testimonies and the statute that he gave them.
 - 8** O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.
 - 9** Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy!
(Psalm 99, ESV)
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I lived in England for a short time, and outside my window, a beautiful Wisteria vine climbed fifteen feet up a latticework. In springtime, it sent forth majestic violet flowers that hung heavily off the strong vine. Wisteria is a climbing plant. It grows by twining its stems around a sturdy structure that then pulls it up into the sky, safely off the ground.

Our lives are like this. We can't grow strong or tall on our own. Because life is filled with so much uncertainty and pain, the world we inhabit is so complex, we reach for something sturdy we can put our faith in. Our latticework are the people, ideas, and institutions we latch onto, hoping that the truths they represent will give our lives strength and hope. In turn, this latticework of persons or ideologies dictates and shapes our lives.

Humans are not divided by those who live by faith, and those who don't. Life demands faith, and we all, in different ways, live by putting our faith in something. It would be wise, therefore, to step back and ask what Latticework is shaping our lives.

Christians have always faced squarely this relationship between faith and life. From the earliest days, it was understood that Jesus Christ had revealed deep truths to them, about God, the world, and humanity. They knew they needed to reshape their lives around these truths. But Jesus taught a lot of things, and the Bible is a long book, so what could they do? They carefully drew several essential truths out of the witness of Scripture and cultivated a Christian Creed.

A creed states the core beliefs underlying a culture, movement, or religion; believing these beliefs is meant to draw the devotee into a better life.¹

Creeds are not only religious. A country may have a creed (some may remember saying the pledge of allegiance in school each day). A culture may have a creed. I might suggest popular American culture's current creed is "be true to yourself." The enlightenment gave rise to the non-religious creed that asked adherents to believe that man was autonomous and reason alone could lead to a more virtuous world.² We have found that a creed prizing the individual and reason has not, in the end, giving rise to a more virtuous or more peaceful world.

Christians remain committed to the ancient Creeds, especially the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed. These Creeds have their roots in the early church and set before us the truest truths of Christianity. The Creed is not merely meant to be memorized and recited; the creed is meant to draw you into a reality that will change your heart and reform your life. Like the Wisteria growing tall and bursting forth with flowers, Christians believe that the Creeds offer our lives the structure and support we need to flourish.

Because we can drift into adhering to false creeds, or only halfway believe the Christian Creed, it's helpful to revisit the ancient Creeds. In this series we'll consider the essential truths that the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds set before us, noting how these truths arise from Scripture and asking how they shape our present lives. We begin where the Creeds do, with God.

The Doctrine of God

Both the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed begin with God and a few truths about Him.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth (Apostles' Creed)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen (Nicene Creed)

Various systems of thought—philosophy, science, mathematics—emphasize the importance of first principles. A first principle is the most fundamental truth upon which all other truths depend. The Creed begins with God, because God is the first principle.

The most important thing you believe is what you believe about God. Whether or not you believe God exists, and if you do, who you believe God is and what you believe God is like, these are the first principles that shape everything else you believe and think about yourself and the world. It's worth pausing, therefore, to ask whether you do believe in God, and if so, what you believe God to be like.

The Christian worldview starts with God, and the Creed sets forth four further aspects to describe who God is and what God is like: God is One, God is Creator, God is Almighty, God is Father. Like travelers approaching a great mountain, I want to give us four vistas of who God is by highlighting these four aspects.

I. God is One

God is One. We must begin here and understand its significance. God is not one deity among many, nor is God some divine spark that lives inside of you. God is One, not many, God is One, and not you. God's oneness is emphasized throughout the Bible, and this was needed. For God's people, from Israel in the Old Testament to the Church in the New Testament, were surrounded by a vast array of so-called gods: Marduk and Baal among the Mesopotamians, Isis and Osiris among the Egyptians, and the complicated pantheon of the Greeks. Into this chaos God thundered through his servant Moses: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). The Psalmist then draws out the implication: "The LORD is great...he is exalted over all the peoples" (Psalm 99:2). God is over all peoples because He alone is God. This was a radical and leveling claim.

We snicker at our ancient ancestors' cosmos, filled with vying deities acting like insecure teenagers. Yet, the emphasis on God's oneness is just as important for us to consider. Interest in spirituality is not waning, and many people now take to it the way one might move through a smorgasbord line: dabbling here and there, in order to create a religious concoction of their own making. This tendency is an affront to God's oneness, and can be seen in Elizabeth Gilbert's 2006 book, *Eat, Pray, Love*.

Gilbert's memoir recounts her spiritual odyssey out of an early-mid-life crisis into the peace of self-realization. Finding her career and husband unfulfilling, she cries out to God one night. But not to the traditional Christian idea of God, she is more open-minded this time, addressing instead "the universe, Great void, the Force, the Supreme Self, the Whole, the Creator, the Light, the Higher Power."³

To her surprise, a voice replies. "It was not an Old Testament Hollywood Charlton Heston," she writes, "but merely my own voice, speaking from within myself." The voice prompts her to be true to herself, which involves leaving her career and husband for an adventure across Italy, India, and Indonesia. During her odyssey, she spends time with a Hindu ashram, a Balinese medicine man, falls into the arms of a Brazilian divorcee, and essentially finds herself.

Gilbert's journey is a helpful example of two abiding problems with modern spirituality. First, although she draws from many, she never commits to any religious system. In the end, she's neither a Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, or secularist. Instead, the world's religions are a smorgasbord from which she concocts her own spirituality. She tells her readers, "You have every right to cherry-pick when it comes to moving your spirit and finding peace in God...."

But upon closer reflection, Gilbert's new religious system doesn't really exist outside of herself at all—rather, she has become her own god. She goes on, "You take whatever works from wherever you can find it, and you keep moving toward the light." But what is this light? Does this idea of light not assume there is some single object and goal that is absolutely true? But this light turns out to be herself. The highest spiritual wisdom, she discovers, isn't just that God waits for us inside our own hearts, but that "God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are".⁴

Now we find such a statement shocking on the one hand. But, on the other hand, can we admit that there is an allure here? Gilbert seems so strong and open-minded, able to break free from the shackles of old systems of belief. There is a reason her book remained on the NYT best-seller list for 187 weeks (that's over three years!)—it struck a nerve.

Put most simply, *Eat, Pray, Love* represents the modern movement in spirituality to where the self is God and the self is therefore at the center of the universe—everything revolves around me. This

appears alluring to well-educated, privileged people, and some can afford such a quest. But upon any close inspection, this is a sad view of the world.

Not only would a world where everyone was their own god end up in anarchy, is the idea of shaping life around each movement of one's heart really beautiful? Does anyone think giving a child everything she wants, at every moment, is a good way to form a virtuous and healthy human being?

Our hearts need to be tutored by a wisdom beyond our own, disciplined, shaped, and guided by a Being who can see farther than we can.

The Christian Creed, in its declaration of belief in One God, fiercely confronts the modern trend to make one's self the center of the universe: When we say, "We believe in One God," we simultaneously say **we are not God**, and that **there is One True Source of Life and Meaning around which life must orbit**. So, there is One God, one great mountain we are standing before. Can we say more about what this great God is like? The Creed tells us that this God is the Creator.

II. God the Creator

The Creed states, *I believe in God...creator of heaven and earth*. There is so much we could say here but need to limit ourselves to a brief comment. Humans need order and struggle with chaos. At a subconscious level, we need to know that our world and our lives are unfolding according to some purpose and order—that they mean something and are headed somewhere. In a world of many gods and smorgasbord spirituality, or in a world of no God, it is hard to believe that our world and our lives are part of a coherent and good story—hard to imagine that life isn't meaningless or pointless.

Atheist Richard Dawkins, in his book, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, articulates a harrowing view of life without God the Creator:

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, not any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.⁵

If there is no intelligent, benevolent Creator—then our world is not a beautiful story, but a meaningless accident. *I believe in God the Creator.* This means that God is the author of the story of life, and the architect of the purpose and form of creation, and that history is God’s story and moving toward God’s goal. And what God the Creator says, in Genesis 1 when He sets His project in motion, is that it is “very good.” That God created the world, and that creation is filled with his wisdom and moving toward his purpose, is essential to a sturdy and hope-filled life.

What is this Creator God like? The Creed goes on to say “*I believe in God the ... Almighty.*”

III. God the Almighty

When we move from the magnificence of God’s act of Creation down into the details of our lives, we need to know more about what God is like—His abilities and character. To say that God is Almighty is to convey something about his breathtaking greatness. These can be seen in both His abilities and His character.

In ability, God does not have limits like we do. God is all-knowing, all-wise, all-present, and all-powerful.

Psalm 99 captures His power in the language of kingship: “The Lord reigns...and he reigns over all people” (99:1, 2).

In Psalm 139 David wonders at the limitless nature of God’s knowledge and presence:

1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
3 You ... are acquainted with all my ways.
4 Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.
5 You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me....
7 Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
(Psalm 139)

God wears no watch because He exists outside time; God uses no map because He is everywhere present; God consults no counsel because He knows everything and is perfectly wise. God has never blinked or slept, God has never been afraid or confused; God's authority and power have never been in threat, and God's purpose for His Creation and People cannot fail—for He has "declared the End from the Beginning" (Isaiah 46:10).

What does all this mean for our everyday lives?

A few years ago, I was in a bit of a funk. I was spending most of my time alone, tucked away in the stacks of a library, overwhelmed by the pressure of writing a long dissertation. At times I'd go four days without talking to another human being. I began to feel off, on edge, in a funk. Where has God led me? Where was God in this brutal season? Maybe your life is always easy and straightforward, but for most of us, we have times when we wonder what God is up to. One morning, long before the sun came up, I took out a 3x5 index card and wrote across the top: "The Truth about God." I then wrote out as many truths about who God is and what God is like that I could think of. The card reads:

God is unchallengeably powerful, ferociously strong; God is overwhelmingly impressive, entirely righteous and holy; God is absolutely reliable, completely trustworthy, all-wise; God listens to every prayer and responds wisely and lovingly; God guides you and is leading you on an adventure; God is right here, present, you're never alone...

My list ended up including thirteen truths about God. I began to read the list every morning and I'd carry the card with me throughout the day, often re-reading it. Interestingly, there was one truth about God that I kept coming back to, so I highlighted it. The card reads simply, "God cares for you." I needed to know this more than anything. And this truth, that God cares for us, takes us into the fourth and final aspect of God that the Creed sets forth: *I believe in God the Father.*

IV: God the Father

For many Christians, this is where we like to start: God is Father, and therefore we lean into His care for us. And of course, this is so true and so deeply important. Jesus teaches us to begin our prayer, "Our Father, who art in heaven" (Luke 11:2).

However, while we love to ponder that God is father, we less often ponder the reality of His righteousness, His power, that He is all-knowing and all-present. My index card was pressing the truth of God's fatherly care into my heart in a deeper way because that care was surrounded by these other attributes.

- I rested in God's fatherly care, *because God is completely wise*, and therefore I knew He was making good decisions about my life.
- I rested in God's fatherly care, *because God is all-powerful*, and therefore I knew His plan for me and the world could never be stopped.
- I rested in God's fatherly care, *because God is all-present*, and therefore I knew I was never alone.
- I rested in God's fatherly care because I knew *He was holy and righteous*, and therefore while He would mercifully forgive me of my sins, I knew He was still going to take sin and darkness seriously, which my heart needed to know.

God is One, therefore we revolve around His purposes, not ours. God is Creator, therefore the world and our lives have purpose and meaning. God is Almighty and God is Father, therefore we can truly rest in His all-powerful tenderness.

How should we respond to such a vista of such a Being as God?

Make your index card and get clear about who God really is. Not according to your gut or your culture or some institution, but according to the Ancient Creed which draws from the Holy Scriptures. Learn to speak the great word *God* once again seriously, responsibly, reverentially. And meditate on this vista long enough so that it starts to change you.

In Psalm 4:3, David tells us the following: "Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself." The purpose of your life, no matter the circumstance you are in or prospects you have, is to be godly. How will you become godly, if you don't know the One True God?

Let the Creed draw you into the very center of reality. Let a fresh vista of God make your life grow more and more godly.

Endnotes

1. A creed ought to address the deepest questions: i.e., The questions that Vatican II suggested were common to all humans: “What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behavior, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? What is judgment? What reward follows death? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery, beyond human explanation, which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and toward which we tend?” (See Flannery, 738; Wright, NTPG, 123 fn. 6).
2. David Brooks, “Building Better Secularists.” *The New York Times*, 3 Feb. 2015. Accessed Jan 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/03/opinion/david-brooks-building-better-secularists.html>
3. Elizabeth Gilbert. *Eat, Pray, Love*, (Penguin, 2006).
4. See Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 192; cited and summarized in Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 214.
5. Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* [Basic Books, 1996], 132–3.; cited in Keller, *Walking with God*, 21.