THE CREED: I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER

Jan-Feb 2017

**about these notes**

Although I hope that they will be useful also to individuals, these notes are intended to assist disciple group leaders as they prepare to lead a session for their group. They will serve you best if you DO NOT SIMPLY SIT AND READ THEM TO YOUR GROUP. I am anticipating that the leader will look at them prayerfully in advance of the session, using them as a prompt or guide to your discussions according to the particular circumstances of your groups. I hope that they will prove useful as you invite the Holy Spirit to lead you into a deeper knowledge of what Jesus wants for your lives.

**Introduction to the series**

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| 8th January**I believe in God the Father:** **I believe…** | 15th January**I believe in God the Father: The Father, our Father** | 22nd January**I believe in God the Father: Creator of heaven and earth** |
| John 20:1-18 | 1 John 2:28-3:10 | John 1:1-11 |

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| 5th February**I believe in God the Father: Holy Father, rebellious children** | 12th February**I believe in God the Father: Full of grace and truth** | 19th February**I believe in God the Father: who made an eternal covenant**  | 26th February**I believe in God the Father: Committed Father, whatever the cost** |
| John 1:9-14 | John 1:9-18,32-4 | Genesis 17:1-8 | John 12:1-6,23-26 |

This new year, we’re planning for growth and expecting God to continue what he’s been doing in our midst, which makes it important for us to make sure our house is in order, and - particularly - to be clear about precisely what it is that we believe at Christians. More important even than giving our all to what we believe, is that we believe in the truth. Faith as small as a mustard seed in what is true will take us infinitely further than an all-consuming passion for something that’s not true.

Because they recognised this, the early church quickly developed clearly recognisable, and easily memorisable creeds to help people to answer their baptismal confession. When people presented for baptism, they were asked to confirm their faith by responding to three questions:

1. Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?
2. Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?
3. Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

To protect against misguided teaching on these core aspects of faith, after much prayer and debate Church leaders agreed on the words of the Ecumenical Creeds such as the Nicene Creed in AD325 and then the Apostles’ Creed in about AD390. These Creeds may not have held the church together completely, as might have been hoped when they were written, but they have, ever since, provided at least a shared and central statement of truth about the Christian faith on which all of the major historical denominations continue to agree.

When we say, or sing the words of the Creed together, the Creed still guards us against error by remind us of those central and essential elements of the historic biblical faith.

So… in January and February, we’ll be digging into John’s Gospel and his letters to find what it is that we believe about God the Father. Through Lent, we’ll consider significant aspects of what we believe about Jesus - God the Son, and then from Easter to Pentecost, we’ll then think about what Christians believe about the Holy Spirit.

The Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,

creator of heaven and earth.

I believe 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 to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;

he ascended into heaven,

he is seated at the right hand of the Father,

and he will come 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.**

1. I believe…

**John 20:1-18**

**1** Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. **2**So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’ **3**So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. **4**Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. **5**He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. **6**Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, **7**as well as the cloth that had been wrapped round Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. **8**Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. **9**(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) **10**Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. **11**Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb **12**and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. **13**They asked her, ‘Woman, why are you crying?’ ‘They have taken my Lord away,’ she said, ‘and I don’t know where they have put him.’ **14**At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. **15**He asked her, ‘Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?’ Thinking he was the gardener, she said, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.’ **16**Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means ‘Teacher’). **17**Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’ **18**Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her.

**GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED**

These questions can be used as ice-breakers in the beginning OR interwoven between the

questions below to draw the group into the discussion.

* Do you think it matters what people believe, as long it makes them feel happy, or makes them behave better? Why?
* Have you ever really explored the evidence behind the truth-claims of the Christian faith? Where would you start?

**Questions for your group**

As we look at this passage, describing the scene immediately after Jesus’ resurrection, we’ll be looking at the experiences of the disciples on that first Easter morning and asking what it tells us that is distinctive about the Christian understanding of faith in God.

A. THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS RATIONAL, COHERENT AND FOLLOWS THE EVIDENCE

* + **Read verse 8, where John describes his own experience. What was it that made John believe?**

He saw. The evidence before his eyes led him to believe.

* + **Read verses 10-16, which describe Mary’s experience. What was it that led her to believe?**

Jesus came to her in the midst of her loss and confusion, and called her by name in the way that he had done countless times before. The evidence of her eyes and ears and her personal experience led her to believe.

* + **Now read verses 6-7 and consider Simon Peter’s experience. What was his reaction?**

[when v6 is translated as ‘he saw’, the Greek word is actually *theorei,* from which our word theorise comes, implying that he saw, weighed, and carefully considered what was before him]

* + **Taking all of these accounts together, what was the basis of the first disciples’ belief?**
	+ **The Christian faith is, and has always been an evidence-based faith, and utterly rational. What evidence does our faith draw upon?**

[Lead your group into a discussion regarding the physical, relational and spiritual evidence of Scripture, eye-witness testimony and personal experience - encourage people to consider any personal accounts of miracles that they have witnessed, which - like the miracle of the resurrection - have made them stop and take more seriously the claims of Scripture]

* + **Read verse 9. Did the disciples understand everything before they believed? Does that make them intellectually suspect, or is it reasonable to believe, even while seeking understanding?**

[Lead your group into a discussion regarding other things in the world around us that we take on trust, or are happy to believe, despite our lack of a full understadning… e.g. conscience, energy]

* + **What was it that led them to understand that Jesus had to rise? What can we learn from them if we want to understand our faith better?**

Their understanding came from a deep consideration of Jesus’ teaching and the evidence of Scripture and God’s self-revelation through the prophets. It is the same for us!

B. THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS A GIFT FROM GOD

Everything about it stands up to rational scrutiny, but rational scrutiny alone won’t get us there.

* **How many times had Jesus told his disciples that the Son of Man must die and on the third day be raised?**
* **Did they believe him? Were they expecting it?**

It was well enough known that even the Romans wanted to prevent his disciples from claiming that he had risen by placing a guard on the tomb. His disciples knew what Jesus had said, and yet at first, not one of them believed, or even anticipated that it could really happen until God opened their eyes were opened. Ultimately, however much the they knew about it and should perhaps have anticipated it, their belief only came when God chose the moment to give it to them.

**Application:**

* + **If even our own faith is a miracle - a gift from God - remember that there is not a single person (however far gone you think that they are, however enslaved to bad habits, or broken, or downright nasty they appear to you right now) who cannot be saved if they receive the gift of faith.**
	+ **So… never think yourself better than others who don’t yet believe, and never give up hope - never write anyone off. Take time to pray for your loved ones, for your friends, pray for your persecutors, and pray for your enemies.**
* **If any of you are still in doubt, but wondering, intrigued, recognise that when your interest is aroused, it’s God knocking at the door of your heart, wanting you to let him in and for you to take him seriously and engage with him personally (Revelation 3:20). Don’t put it off - lay aside your prejudice and biases, and open your heart and your mind to God and let him show you that he is real.**

**ALLOW TIME FOR GOD TO MINISTER TO YOU AS YOU PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER.**