

# This We Believe

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I just pray now that you would please use me to bring forth your word of truth, that we might be able to receive what you have for us this morning, that we might indeed stand on the gospel of Jesus Christ as we have already sung, and that we would be able to understand and to display true faith.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Today we begin our new series on the Nicene Creed. And some of you may be wondering, why study a creed at all? Aren't we evangelical Protestants? Don't we believe the Bible alone is our authority? That is entirely reasonable to ask, and by the end of today, I hope you will see why Christians throughout history have found creeds both necessary and helpful.

But let's begin in a different place. Let's think about our world. And isn't it interesting to discover that actually, our world is filled with creeds, both formal and informal?

In many neighborhoods in America, you will find quite a few homes putting up this particular sign in their yard. In this home, we know women's rights are human rights, no person is illegal, black lives matter, science is real, love is love.

[ 1 : 40 ] So think about it. What are these households doing? They are proclaiming a secular creed, aren't they? By displaying such signs publicly, they are making summary statements about what they believe, what they stand for, what they think are the core values by which all of society ought to function.

They are also distinguishing themselves from those who don't hold onto such values. Now, you might agree or disagree with these statements, but the point is, they are fundamentally and are functionally creeds, even if we don't think to call them that.

And once you go looking for them, you will notice creeds are everywhere. If you go on the company website of Google, you will find a list called 10 things we know to be true.

They include statements like, focus on the user and all else will follow. It's best to do one thing really, really well.

And fast is better than slow. Again, for all intents and purposes, that's their creed. If you work at Google, you're expected to affirm and sign on to that and to make sure your working life at the very least matches that philosophy.

[ 3 : 15 ] And did you know, if you are a Malaysian citizen, you subscribe to a creed as well? Anyone know what that is? It's called, on the screen, the Rukun Negara.

Our neighbours have their own versions as well. Indonesia has the Pancasila. The Philippines have their four pillars. So like it or not, creeds are everywhere.

Every society, every movement, every nation summarises its convictions in words that are meant to be said together and to live out.

The question is not so much, do we have a creed? But, whose creed do we confess? Which statement of faith do we ultimately subscribe to?

And that brings us to the Nicene Creed. You see, what is this creed? Well, the opening two words of the creed tells us, doesn't it?

[ 4 : 22 ] It doesn't start with, I think, or, I prefer. Rather, it starts by saying, we believe.

Put another way, these are the things you and I, if we call ourselves Christians, are convinced of. In fact, in Latin, it starts with the word credimus, from the verb credo, which is where we get the English word creed.

So the creed, basically, is our statement of belief. It is a statement of faith all Christians everywhere have subscribed to for over a thousand seven hundred years.

And we will be exploring this creed section by section over the coming weeks. But before we talk about what, or more accurately, who Christians believe in, today, I want to explore a more fundamental question first.

What does that little word believe actually mean? Or put another way, what does it mean to say we have faith?

[ 5 : 46 ] Because so often, people get the idea of faith wrong. They do so in at least three ways. First, there is what we might call the faith is foolishness crowd.

that's essentially the view of some non-Christians. Perhaps the most famous spokesman for this view is the Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins.

About two decades ago, in his best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, he famously said, faith is belief without evidence and reason.

delusion. And then he went even further, saying, well, that is also the definition of delusion. In other words, Dawkins regards Christians who affirm the Nicene Creed as fundamentally deluded.

People who cannot face reality as it really is. To him, we are simply naive and gullible folk who have talked ourselves into believing that some higher being exists and desires a relationship with us.

[ 7 : 02 ] Faith is essentially us fooling ourselves. And honestly, if faith really was just about believing things without any basis, he would have a point.

But is it? I will come back to that. So that is the first view, the idea that faith is foolishness, a distinctly non-Christian understanding of faith.

But the next two I will mention are held by professing Christians. So second, there is the faith is a false crowd. Now, according to some teachers, faith is a tangible, active force you must release to bring about real-world results.

So, if you want healing or financial blessings, it is said, you must declare it in faith to cause it to come into existence.

And you better not say anything negative because that will bring about negative results. things. So to take just one example, which I have heard firsthand, you might be asked to say something like this.

[ 8 : 23 ] In the name of Jesus, I declare the Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want. Lack has no place in me. And if you didn't get the outcome you desire, that's because you have a faith problem.

you didn't believe enough, so you couldn't harness the force enough to get your breakthrough.

That's what these people say. But again, as we'll see from the Bible later, such a position gets the idea of faith badly wrong.

And then third of all, there's what I will call the faith is a formality crowd. These are the Christians who might say something along these lines.

What really counts is how you live, not what you believe. After all, does not doctrine divide? Or at the very least, does it not distract us from loving God and loving others?

So getting into the content of our faith, or at least the details, is irrelevant, they say. And I am very sympathetic to this crowd.

[ 9 : 42 ] After all, we all instinctively dislike people who don't back up their words with works. But to reduce faith to a formality, to say the content doesn't matter as long as you live well, is to gut faith of exactly the substance the Bible gives it.

Godliness. And as I hope we will see both today, and indeed throughout the series, it is impossible to divide faith from godliness.

As the early church father, Athanasius, who is going to be a very important figure in the history of this queen, says, he who believes in God is not cut off from godliness, and he who has godliness really believes.

So when the Nicene Creed says, we believe, indeed when the Bible speaks about faith at all, it means something different from all three of these positions.

things. But perhaps you might ask, is getting this right that important? Fair question. So come with me to Hebrews 3 verse 19.

[ 11 : 07 ] What does it say? So we see that they were not able to enter because of their unbelief. What is the writer to the Hebrews talking about?

He is looking back to that generation of Israelites in the Old Testament who failed to enter the promised land God was leading them towards.

And Hebrews 3 makes the reason unmistakably clear. They did not receive the promised inheritance because of unbelief.

They failed to exercise true faith in the face of hardship and uncertainty and essentially gave up on God.

And so they never entered the land God promised them. So that means getting faith wrong is not merely an academic problem.

[12:09] According to scripture, it determines whether or not you enter into what God has promised. this. So what is faith?

Well, a few chapters later in Hebrews chapter 11, the writer to the Hebrews shows us what faith actually is or has. And he highlights three things.

Firstly, faith has substance. It is a settled trust in something real, not imaginary.

Let me read to you the first part of Hebrews chapter 11, verse 1. Now, faith is confidence in what we hope for.

Now, that word that NIV translates as confidence is not an easy word to translate in the context of this verse. but literally it means substance, which is exactly how the older King James version translates it.

[13:17] Now, faith is the substance of things hoped for. But what does that really mean? Well, here is the basic idea.

Imagine if I said to you, I promise you, Malaysia is going to win the 2026 World Cup. Now, you would laugh at me, wouldn't you?

Can you imagine Malaysia beating teams like France, Spain, or Argentina? What is more, Malaysia hasn't even qualified for the 2026 World Cup.

So, yeah, sure, maybe I hope or wish for Malaysia to come out as the World Cup winners, but clearly what I am saying is of no substance. You could even say I am deluding myself.

But the Bible says true faith is different because it has substance. When you have faith, you are basically saying you trust God to do what he has said he will do.

[14:31] And you believe you have good grounds for doing so. So, for instance, if he says, one day, as someone who is in Christ, I will have the joy of seeing him face to face that will make any present suffering worthwhile, I believe him.

I treat what he says as having substance. And the reason I do that is not because I am just naturally an optimistic person.

It is because God has already proven himself. He has promised to deal with our sin and not let death have the final word.

and he has already kept that promise in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. So, my trust is based on something substantial and I will live like it.

Now, notice, faith, then, is not a force. It doesn't imagine future reality into existence. existence.

Rather, faith simply receives God's promises as so certain and trustworthy that those future realities begin to shape the believer's present life now.

[16:10] So, here is a simple illustration. Imagine the child whose father promises, I'm coming home Friday and we are going on a trip together.

now, the trip has not yet happened. Nothing visible has changed in the house. Friday, you could say, doesn't appear yet to be real.

But because the child trusts the father, the future promise already affects the present. That is why the child packs a bag, talks excitedly about the trip, counts down the days, and lives in expectation. Although the trip is still future, the father's trustworthy promise has already given that future event a kind of present reality in the child's heart and behavior.

And biblical faith works like that. God but even more deeply because the father in this case is God himself.

[17:22] In fact, we see this beautifully worked out in one of the most important verses in the Old Testament. Genesis 15 verse 6. Now here's the context.

God has made a staggering promise to Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars. Now at this point, Abraham is old, his wife Sarah is barren, he has no children, there is absolutely nothing visible to confirm this promise.

And yet we are told Abraham believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now that's it.

No heroic act, no dramatic gesture, he simply took God at his word. He simply heard a promise and said yes to the one who made it.

As one scholar puts it, Abraham's faith was a small thing in itself. Its greatness lies entirely in the greatness of the promise.

[ 18 : 42 ] That is exactly why faith has substance. That is why the Nicene Creed starts by saying we believe and for the rest of the creed it simply goes on to describe who God is.

Because what matters is not the intensity of our faith but the reliability of the one in whom we believe.

But there is more. Secondly, faith is assurance. It is a firm conviction about unseen reality.

That is the second half of Hebrews 11 verse 1. Faith is assurance about what we do not see. And verse 2, that is exactly what so many of the Old Testament figures we know were commended for, weren't they?

So think of Noah, for example. What unseen reality was he convinced of? Answer, the coming flood.

[ 19 : 59 ] Although all around him were sunny skies, he could see the flood was coming because God said so. Or as we've already observed, isn't that Abraham as well?

Even though all he could see was his own advanced age and Sarah's barrenness, he was convinced of the unseen reality that God will give him a child because God said so.

And did you notice how these realities are made clear in their hearts? By faith.

By trusting what God says. Biblical faith, you see, is fundamentally a hearing faith.

It is a response to what God has said. yes, sometimes God does show a sign to help strengthen one's trust, like when God showed Abraham the stars.

[ 21 : 07 ] But even then, it is the word of promise, not the sign in the sky that is still the focus. So when we say we believe, what we are really doing is responding to God's word with believing trust.

And when that happens, faith begins to unveil the unseen, as the commentator Philip Hughes so beautifully puts it. It shows us what we cannot see on our own.

But then notice what faith unveils is not something vague. Which brings us to the third thing Hebrews 11 highlights. So thirdly, faith involves both understanding and relationship.

Look at verse 3. By faith, we understand that the universe was formed at God's command so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

In this verse, the writer begins to illustrate what faith looks like. He says, think about creation.

[ 22 : 27 ] Did any of us observe the creation of this world? No, of course not. Instead, we take hold of this truth by faith.

We have a subtle trust and a firm conviction that God did indeed speak this world into existence by his word. But here is the point I want to make.

Did you notice faith here involves understanding something? So faith isn't just a warm feeling in your chest. It is not just a spiritual vibe.

Rather, it lays hold of a specific truth claim. It requires knowledge. In this case, knowledge that God made the world by his word.

So faith is always faith in certain specific things about God that have been revealed to us.

[ 23 : 35 ] We can't just make up what we like about God and then say, ah, we believe in that God. And this becomes even clearer when we get to verse 6.

Listen to what the writer says. And without faith, it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Did you notice the assumption built into that verse? Once again, faith involves understanding certain things to be true.

we must believe that God exists. We must believe that he rewards those who seek him.

Those are truth claims. They are statements about who God is and what God does. In other words, biblical faith is not empty spirituality.

[ 24 : 39 ] It has content. Now, this might sound obvious, but did you know that set Christianity apart from most other religions in the ancient world?

In the Roman world, religion was primarily about ritual and practice. You offered your incense, you performed your sacrifices, you participated in the festivals.

Whether you actually believe any of the stories about the gods was beside the point. Nobody asked whether you had a personal relationship with Jupiter or surrendered your life to Apollo.

What method was that you performed the rites? It was all about what you did, not what you believed. And that way of thinking isn't just ancient.

isn't a lot of our folk religion today the same? One scholar argues that traditional Chinese religions have less to do with affirming specific doctrines and more to do with observing the right customs and social practices in light of an assumed supernatural order.

[ 26 : 07 ] But Christianity from the very beginning insisted that what you believe matters because the God you worship is not an impersonal force to be appeased but a person to be known.

You cannot trust someone you know nothing about. Faith in other words is never just a formality. It always involves understanding. We believe truths about God like that he exists. But it always also involves relationship because as verse 6 says we should seek him.

We look to please him. And so faith requires both understanding and relationship. Perhaps think of it this way.

J.I. Packer once pointed out that the phrase I believe in can mean two very different things. I can say I believe in UFOs meaning I think they exist.

[ 27 : 25 ] So that's primarily intellectual. But I can also say I believe in democracy meaning I am committed to it.

I think it is good. I think it is true and I am prepared to live by it. And when the Nicene Creed opens with we believe in one God it means both.

We believe that God exists and we are committed to him. We trust him. We stake our lives on him. That is biblical faith in a nutshell. It has substance it provides assurance it involves understanding and relationship and it is ultimately a trusting response to the God who has spoken to us first. Now here is the thing throughout scripture this response of faith often takes on the shape of verbal confession.

[ 28 : 41 ] What I mean is this when God reveals himself God's people often put what they know into summary statements.

They say it out loud. They say it together and they pass those words on. Take for instance Deuteronomy 6 verse 4 which is known as the Shema.

Hear O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is one. That is basically Israel's creed.

It is the oldest confession of faith in all of scripture. The Israelites have learned who God is and now they put it into summary form.

Then notice what God tells them to do. Deuteronomy 6 verse 5. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

[ 29 : 43 ] In other words, not only are they to understand, they are then to seek God and love him. Understanding and relationship are held together.

And indeed, in the rest of Deuteronomy 6, God tells them that they are not just to say this creed, but to pass it on to their children in every way they can.

Or take a New Testament example. Take 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 3 to 4. Now here this on the screen. For what I receive, I pass on to you as of first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures.

Now notice the way the gospel is summarized and synthesized. Christ died for our sin, Christ was buried, Christ was raised on the third day.

That is basically a creed, isn't it? It is a summary statement of belief. And notice what else Paul says, I received this and I passed it on to you.

[ 31 : 08 ] In other words, Paul appears to have inherited these words from the Christians who came before him. Indeed, some scholars date these words back to around the 80 30s, so just a few years after the resurrection itself.

This might be the earliest Christian creed we have received, confessed, and delivered to the next generation.

So do you see the pattern? God reveals himself, his people respond by putting their faith into words, specific, careful words about who God is and what he has done.

And then they hand those words on. The Shema, the summary in 1 Corinthians 15, and more besides.

You know, you could look up 1 Timothy 3 verse 16, or 1 Corinthians 8 verse 6, or even Romans 10 verse 9, Jesus is Lord. Each one appears to be a creed, born from scripture, shaped by faith, and

passed from one generation to the next.

[ 32 : 28 ] So, if this pattern runs through the whole Bible, God's people summarizing, confessing, and then handing on what they believe, then it shouldn't surprise us that the early church in the post-New Testament era continued doing exactly the same thing.

And that's what brings us to the Nicene Creed. Let me now very briefly tell you a little about its origin. In 325 AD, bishops gathered from across the known world in Nicaea, which is in modern-day Turkey.

And these were not ivory tower academics. Many of them bore the scars of the last great persecution. One bishop, Paphineusius, arrived with an empty eye socket.

His eye had been gouged out for his faith. Another pole of Neocesarea came with hands crippled by red hot iron.

These men knew what their faith had cost them. But why did they come together? because of someone named Arius.

[ 33 : 52 ] I will tell you more about him when we come to the sermon in our series about the person of Jesus. But basically, he was a very influential teacher who was beginning to suggest Jesus was not, in fact, fully God.

Now, that idea didn't come out of nowhere. Arius was reading his Bible and trying to work out the implications of how everything except God was created by God.

And so he reached this conclusion. Jesus was given existence by his father, hence he cannot be fully God.

God But this conclusion threatened the very heart of the biblical gospel. The very gospel those one-eyed and crippled bishops had suffered for.

So that's why these church leaders were in town. They were determined to articulate what the Bible taught in its entirety as faithfully as possible and to pass that faith on.

[ 35 : 03 ] To use the words of 1 Timothy and Titus, they wanted to guard the good deposit, to hold firm to the trustworthy word as has been taught, and follow the pattern of sound words.

And what they produced was a creed, a faithful summary of what the scripture teaches about the God we worship. Not a replacement for the Bible, but a distillation of it, designed to be handed down to subsequent generations.

A grammar, if you like, for speaking accurately about the God we love. And that, by the way, is the answer to the question we started with.

Don't we believe the Bible alone is our final authority? Yes, we do. And the creed stands under that authority, not above it.

But as we have seen this morning, creeds are not something invented by later Christians and imposed on the Bible. Rather, they are synthesis and summary statements of what scripture faithfully teaches.

[ 36 : 19 ] That's why you notice on your handout, every single line of the creed is actually richly drenched with scripture. scripture. And that is why Christians everywhere on every continent have used it for the last 1,700 years.

And so what we're going to do right now actually is we're going to pause, we're going to stand up, and we're going to say this creed together to do what God's people have always done through centuries and centuries.

So can I invite all of you now, please let us stand and let us say the Nicene Creed together. On the count of three.

One, two, three. We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, and Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of the same essence as the Father, through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made human.

[ 37 : 53 ] He was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, he suffered and was buried, and on the third day he rose again, according to the scriptures.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son, is worshipped and glorified.

He spoke through the prophets. We believe in one holy, Catholic, and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen. Thank you very much. Please take a seat. Now that we have said those words together, let me close with a few thoughts about what we have just done.

[ 39 : 04 ] My brothers and sisters, whenever we say those words aloud and affirm them, we are letting the Lord do three things to us. First of all, we are letting his word guard us.

You see, the Nicene Creed was written in part because the church recognized that error sounds very close to truth. Arius used biblical language, you could even say he used biblical reasoning, but his conclusions undermine the very heart of the gospel.

And that is how false teaching often works. It uses the same vocabulary, but redefines the words to mean different things. And this isn't just ancient history.

In every generation, including ours, there are voices that use Christian language, but fill it with different meaning. That's what the faith is a force teachers do.

So the Creed helps us by using very precise formulations based on the Bible to make sure we encounter Jesus as he really is rather than a distorted version of him.

[ 40 : 23 ] They help us avoid fuzzy thinking. But it is not only false teaching the creed guards us against. It also guards us against ourselves.

In our world today, we are often told to write our own creed, to speak our own truth, to follow our own hearts. But by affirming this creed, we are doing something radically different.

We are receiving a truth we did not invent and submitting ourselves to it. Or as one pastor I heard memorably put it, I didn't make this creed up, rather this creed is what makes me up.

So we are saying this is what can correct me if I start straying onto the wrong path. Whether that's because of a false teacher, or because of pressures from family or society, or simply because of my own wandering heart.

Then second of all, we are letting God remind us we are part of something bigger. Notice the creed says, we believe, not just I believe.

[ 41 : 41 ] Now, historically speaking, it is true that some of the earliest versions began with I believe, but over time, most churches changed it to we believe.

Because this creed is not just my own private opinion. It is not my personal hobby horse. This is the shared faith of the church.

It places our individual faith within the much bigger story of what Christians have believed, taught, and handed down from generation to generation.

And in doing so, it anchors us in something older and stronger and more enduring than our own feelings and impressions, which, if we are honest, can only take us so far.

When I am saying these words, I am joining my voice to the church across every century and every continent.

[ 42 : 49 ] I am joining my voices together with Africans and Americans, the persecuted and the not so persecuted, the leaders and the lay people. Did you know that when someone was getting baptized in the early centuries, they would be asked questions that were basically drawn from the creeds?

So, before being dunked in the baptismal pool, you might be asked, do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and died, and rose again on the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into the heavens, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

Now, that's quite a mouthful, isn't it? Those being baptized in our pool don't get asked such a long question. But, basically, one reason every person getting baptized was asked that was because whenever they said, I believe, to that question, they knew they were not just making an individual expression of faith, they were participating in the shared life of a community.

They were really saying, this we believe. Then, finally, third of all, we are letting God reassure us, we belong to Jesus.

You see, this creed is a little bit like a marriage vow. When you make a marriage vow, you are saying to your partner, I'm committed to you. I belong to you.

[ 44 : 35 ] I'm ready to get you to know you more and more over the course of my whole life. That's how this creed is meant to function. And, whenever we recite it, it's a bit like recalling our marriage vows.

We are declaring, this is who we are committed to. This is who we want to know more and more. This is the bridegroom the church is married to.

Now, in any marriage, we all have bad days, don't we? Sometimes, we let down our partner, or we doubt them, and we find words fail us.

And, on those days, often it is the words we say, we have said on our wedding day, that sustain us. Similarly, the Nicene Creed can give you the words to say on the days when you struggle to find them on your own.

They can reassure us that this is whom we believe and who we hold onto. So, my brothers and sisters, I hope that as we work our way through the Nicene Creed in the coming weeks, we will find it leading us back to God himself, and cause us to renew our faith in him.

[ 45 : 54 ] As the Christian writer Travin Wax once said, the church faces her biggest challenge, not when new errors start to win, but when old truths no longer wow.

And my prayer is that over the next few weeks, the Nicene Creed will re-present those old truths, that we might go wow at our great God all over again.

let's pray. Father, as we come to you, we just want to express again, that we do have faith in you, we believe in you, sometimes our faith is weak and feeble, it flickers, it is not always strong, but thank you so much that what matters is not so much the power or the intensity of our faith, but the object of our faith and that is you yourself.

So Father, may we truly exercise biblical faith, may we put our trust in you as we respond to your word, and I pray Lord that as we think through the creed, the faith passed on from generation to generation that we will make a commitment to hold on to that faith, to stand upon it, and to lift that faith out wherever we are.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.