



THE CREED

WHAT WE BELIEVE



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Week 9 - “He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty”

We are continuing in our study through the Apostles’ Creed, one of the earliest Christian statements of faith. One of the reasons we do this is that we need an overarching structure of truth for the church community to be able to thrive.

The culture around us is trying an experiment - it is trying to hold together a society where people believe they can all have their own truths, their own ultimates, they can be their own guides. They can get their identities from within. And it isn’t working, as we are increasingly fractured.

But Christians have historically believed that truth is truth regardless of what we believe about it. We are given identities by God. We believe things that are true because God has revealed them as true. And our connections to family and church community and those bonds are more important than soaring as individuals. So we operate together under a system of truth that we all agree is true.

Christians have always believed there will be some disagreements among us. God is infinite, so none of us know Him fully, which means we all have weaknesses in our beliefs and blind spots in the way we think about God and the world He made. Which results in our having differences among us in belief and in how we live. But all of the differences occur within very important bounds - there are things you can’t deny and still call yourself a Christian.

In the words of the Rich Mullins song about the Apostle's Creed, "I believe what I believe, it's what makes me what I am. I did not make it, no it is making me. It's the very truth of God and not the invention of any man." We are all being shaped and formed by truth, and these important truths of the Creed are not all we should believe, but they provide important boundaries and guides and an overarching truth for us to be corrected by and shaped by so that we might attain unity.

These truths might not help with self-expression and with our quest to make ourselves who we want to be. But that's not a Christian project anyways. These truths shape us into the image of Christ and unify us as a church community.

So we've so far gone through the lines of the Creed that say:

**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
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended to the dead,
And on the third day rose again**

And today:

"He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty"

And this is nothing but joyfully good news for us today.

This doctrine of the ascension is the teaching that Jesus, after his resurrection from the dead and appearing to his followers over the course of 40 days, ascended back into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father.

And this was a real ascension in a real body, just like the resurrection was a real resurrection in a real body.

This wasn't an enlightenment or an elevation of Jesus's consciousness, as a New Ager might say. They might say we are gods and we are capable of an ascension. Some

religions even say we can attain to deity ourselves. But this wasn't just an elevation of consciousness, Jesus physically ascended to the right hand of God the Father Almighty. And we can't do that.

We don't ascend to the right hand of the throne of God. Jesus ascended to this place of glory and authority, and this was the plan all along - that He would come and teach and live and die, but rise again and return to the glory He had before the world began. Before his crucifixion, this scene unfolded in John 17:r

John 17:1-5 - "When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."

Jesus was going to end up back in the glory He had for eternity past.

Luke narrates this ascension in the book of Acts. It was 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead, and the disciples came together as they seemed to do regularly during what was surely an exciting month+ of meeting with the resurrected Christ. So they meet with Jesus and:

Acts 1 "6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

They've been hanging out with Jesus, who has conquered death, and they're still expecting that He's going to overthrow Rome and restore the kingdom of Israel.

Acts 1:7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes,11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus,

who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

And then, the next time anyone sees Jesus in the book of Acts, it's Stephen in Acts 7. Steven preaches a sermon about Jesus, and the people who heard it didn't like what he had to say in his sermon, and they didn't have email back then, so they stoned him to death. And on his way to heaven, he gets a glimpse of what's happening there:

Acts 7:55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.56 And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Jesus who ascended to heaven is now at the right hand of God.

Which has all kinds of implications for how we view God and how we live our lives.

Trinitarian Implications

First, the fact that Jesus exists at the right hand of the Father says something about God. We believe as Christians that God exists in trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And He has always existed that way and always will. You see it in Acts 7:55 - Stephen is full of the Spirit, Jesus is at the right hand of God, the Father. Father Son and Spirit are all operating at once in that account.

There are some people who have seen the Father, Son, and Spirit as modes of God or manifestations of God. And they frame it in different ways, but will usually hold to the idea that the Father became the Son and then the Son became the Spirit. They hold that the three are just God changing forms like water changes from solid, to liquid, to gas. They're all the same thing, just in different states. And some people will say that the Father God of the Old Testament doesn't exist anymore because He became Jesus, and Jesus doesn't exist anymore because He became the Holy Spirit.

This is an ancient heresy, going back to the 2nd and 3rd century, but one that keeps getting adopted in new forms (as most heresies do.) Modern day oneness pentecostals embrace this teaching. TD Jakes, who is perhaps the most famous preacher in the world, had his roots in this teaching, though he seems to have maybe moved toward Christian trinitarian belief in the last decade (I hope so.)

Christian doctrine is that the Father always has existed and always will, same with the Son, and same with the Spirit. God is always three in one, He doesn't just take three different forms. Father, Son, and Spirit are not modes of God or manifestations of God or forms of God, but three persons in the trinity.

And anytime we talk about the nature of God, some of the pushback is that "this isn't very practical." But let me push back against that pushback. Because we can't see God, how we describe Him matters immensely.

If I were to describe my wife to you, I could mess up the description a little. If I didn't describe what she's wearing exactly right you might be able to find her. But if I got it way wrong - if I say she is 6'2, and really angry all the time, I'd be describing a completely different woman and you'd never be able to find her, because I would have described her so wrongly.

And we can get a description of God so wrong that we actually have a different god altogether. If we say there are a million forms of god, we aren't describing the same God as Christians worship. If we say everyone is god, that's not the Christian God. And if we say God has changed forms from Father to Son to Spirit, historically that falls outside the bounds of a Christian description of God - it's a different god altogether.

Now, everybody gets some details wrong about God. He's infinite and we can't know Him fully. But He has revealed Himself to us in His word so we can know Him truly. So we will disagree about a number of things about God - does God still work in certain ways in our day, what will be the nature of the world before God returns - there are plenty of small details we can get wrong but still get the right God. And we all must have plenty of misconceptions about God.

But if we are so wrong about God that we are describing a different God altogether, we are worshipping a different God. We can be not Christians even if we call ourselves Christians, because Christians, by definition, worship the Christian God. So it matters.

The Right Hand

And the "right hand" is the place of authority. We talk about a right-hand man being a leader's key guy. Acts 2 calls it a place of exaltation:

Acts 2:33 "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God..."

By saying Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the throne of God, we are saying that Jesus today is exalted at the highest place of authority in the universe.

If you're wondering what Jesus is up to, He is ruling and reigning over all things.

1 Corinthians 15:25-27a “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.”

He is ruling and reigning, and the future is secure - Jesus is currently subduing all of his enemies as He reigns over all things, and one day He will return and the final enemy, death itself, will be destroyed.

Everything is beneath Him, He is over all. Jesus went to the lowest place, to the cross, down to the grave, descended to the dead, but then rose from the grave and ascended into heaven.

Thomas Watson writes, “Christ in His humiliation descended so low that it was not fit to go lower; and in His exaltation, He ascended so high that it is not possible to go higher. In His resurrection, He was exalted above the grave; in His ascension, He was exalted above the airy and starry heaven; in His sitting at God’s right hand, He is exalted above the highest heavens far, “far above all heavens” (Eph 4:10).¹

Nothing is beyond His power.

He is fully reigning over everything with nothing that can stop Him.

Which tells us more about what Jesus is like:

He is not frustrated, He isn't afraid for the future, He isn't hindered in His reign in any way. He sits on the highest throne of authority in the universe.

Psalm 115:3 Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases.

¹ Thomas Watson in: Owen, John; Spurgeon, Charles H.; Winslow, Octavius; Flavel, John; Plumer, William S.; Watson, Thomas. The Glory of Christ (Free Grace Broadcaster Book 244) . Chapel Library. Kindle Edition.

Sometimes we get a picture of God as a frustrated God.

Like he created everything, and something went wrong in His plan, and He's like a kid who got his hands on a chemistry set and just started mixing chemicals and something accidentally blew up and now he's working to clean it all up before mom finds out.

So He sits in heaven exasperated like the whole thing is out of control. He's saying, "O crud, this has taken a turn for the worse."

But God is actually a God who is completely joyful, because he is still very much in control and he is still in heaven doing whatever he pleases.

To see him as a happy God we need to see him as a sovereign God, a God who is still in control and always was.

If you look at your life, the times that you are unhappy and frustrated are the times when things are not going as you had planned – the new job is not what you expected it to be, clients are not liking your service, the house is falling apart, the schedule is not going the way you wanted it to, relationships are strained, and you become a frustrated person.

And we might be tempted to think that things have gone so badly here that that must be God. He must be miserable and moody and grumpy, because He reads the news, and everything looks like a big dumpster fire to us.

But Jesus, after conquering death on the cross and rising again the third day ascended to heaven where He is ENTHRONED. Fully reigning at God's right hand.

He is in control of his creation, still calling the shots, and is very content and happy...

"I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'" (Isaiah 46:9–10)

"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates

the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations. (Psalm 33:10–11)

People don't frustrate God, he frustrates them in their arrogant plans.

He fully, completely, without any frustration or fear, with nothing hidden from His sight, rules over all things and sustains all things.

And, without losing control of the wheel for a single second, without ever taking His eyes off the road, Jesus is steering all of history to His intended purpose. And it is all going exactly according to plan.

Ephesians 4 says this is one of the implications of the fact that He ascended to heaven and is seated in authority:

Ephesians 4:10 “He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.”

He fills or some translations say fulfills all things. He's over it all with nothing over Him, and uses that reign to fulfill all of His plans.

This is both cosmic and personal.

Colossians 1:15-17 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Jesus exercises a huge, all-encompassing cosmic reign over everything. He is guiding the grand narrative of history to His intended end. He is holding all things together.

And his reign goes right down to the details of our lives:

Matthew 10:29-31 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

God is ruling his creation right down to the number of hairs on your head. And even if it seems that evil has won:

Romans 16:20: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

Your cancer diagnosis has not thwarted his plans.

Not getting into that college has not messed up God’s plans.

Your sin has not thwarted his plans.

The triumph of evil people around you has not thwarted his plans.

Your helpless situation is being reigned over by Jesus Christ.

COVID didn’t mess up any of his plans.

The worst of tyrannical rulers is far outranked by the Best of Rulers, and nothing they do can stop God’s plans from standing.

Because He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Jesus is on the throne, presently actively reigning over all things.

And if we believe this, it should create in us a peace and hopefulness.

J.I. Packer: “In a weary world in which grave philosophers were counseling suicide as man’s best option, the unshakeable rollicking optimism of the first Christians, who went on feeling on top of the world however much the world seemed to be on top of them, made a vast impression. (It still does, when Christians are Christian enough to show it!)”²

Over the last couple of pandemic years, we’ve seen this. We’ve seen so many Christians who have been faced with all of the fears, but have been able to keep going with joy and hope, even when everything was falling apart.

But we’ve also seen a number of us betray our lack of confidence that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

² **Affirming the Apostles Creed** by J. I. Packer

In times of fear, Christians should be the ones who maintain our sanity by fearing the Lord and trusting in the reign of Jesus. But at times we embraced the same conspiratorial mindset as those around us, and that we need to repent of.

During times of societal change, crisis, uncertainty, and fear, conspiracy theories flourish.³ False conspiracy theories do a lot of harm to society by stoking hatred, fear, and violence. When embraced and spread by Christians, they divide congregations and discredit the witness of the church in the broader community. At its worst, the eagerness to embrace conspiracy theories can be an alternative to the Christian faith and way of life.

Not everything that is called a conspiracy theory is false, not everyone who is called a conspiracy theorist is one (in fact people can unfairly be discredited just by labeling them conspiracy theorists, and we shouldn't do that).

And some conspiracy theories should be believed because they are true. The holocaust was a horrible conspiracy, disbelieved by many until the truth was uncovered. As Christians, our belief in human depravity certainly makes room for the conspiring of evil people in secret to do harm (Proverbs 1:11). So not every conspiracy theory should be immediately dismissed as an impossibility.

But those with the conspiratorial mindset show an excessive eagerness to embrace conspiracy theories. They make sense of the world by involving their belief that malevolent conspiracies are operating behind many events, and this way of thinking becomes ingrained. The best single predictor that someone will believe a conspiracy theory is that they believe another, even an unrelated or contradictory one.⁴ This shows a readiness to accept narratives that follow the pattern: "there's a secret plot by powerful conspirators out to get us."

Conspiracy theories tend to spread more rapidly during times of societal crisis. During these times, people have a heightened sense of fear and, as a result, are vigilant to look for threats, blame scapegoats, and search for causes that could explain the massive effects they see in the world.

³ [The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories](#) by Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, (London:Routledge, 2018), 24.

⁴ [The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories](#) by Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, (London:Routledge, 2018), 24.

Because conspiracy theories create a sense of belonging and community among people who embrace them, the tight-knit community created by these beliefs can become more important than the community of the local church. Stories of church splits during the pandemic due to conspiratorial thinking in a certain clique are not hard to come by.

Those adherents have often been willing to publicly excoriate those who do not hold those beliefs on social media, and then come to the Lord's table together on the following Sunday without a sense that they have done any wrong to the body.

The public witness of Bible-believing Christians has also been greatly harmed by their ready embrace of conspiracy theories and their quickness to spread them online. Being loose with the truth, gullible, and willing to spread falsehoods garners Christians the reputation of not being able to discern truth, judge soberly, or speak with wisdom. Beyond all of these considerations, of course, is the fact that spreading falsehoods is a violation of the ninth commandment.

And that antidote to that mindset is knowing that we have a God who is so good to us in Christ, who loves us, who reigns over all things, and so we don't need to be afraid.

Even if we are right that there is a conspiracy happening as they sometimes do, we can love our enemies. We can prayerfully wait. We can trust God to be good to us.

We don't need to fear secret cabals, not because they never exist, but because no secret cabal, even if it really exists and is really powerful, gets to sit on the right hand of the throne of God.

To use theological language: Jesus reigns, so we can chill.

Jesus is firmly seated on the right hand of the throne of God.

Also, listen to what the scriptures say about what He is doing there:

Romans 8:34 "34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."

Hebrews 9:24 "For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which

are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”

He’s at the right hand of God, and He is interceding.

Robert Murray McCheyne: *“If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me.”*⁵

John Owen was a pastor who had ten children die in infancy, and afterwards he wrote, *“[O]A due contemplation of the glory of Christ will restore and compose the mind... [It] will lift the minds and hearts of believers above all the troubles of this life, and is the sovereign antidote that will expel all the poison that is in them; which otherwise might perplex and enslave their souls.”*

I’m sure Owen grieved and felt those losses acutely and was probably affected by them for life. And maybe he overspoke a little - we don’t have all the poisons expelled from us until we see Jesus.

But the glory of Christ reigning and interceding for us at the right hand of God the Father shouldn’t do nothing to us. It shouldn’t not affect us. If we believe this is true, that Jesus is that good to us, loves us that much, has that much power, and is praying for us, how could we be unaffected by that?

Only if we don’t believe.

If we believe this it must have an effect on our:

Worry - because Jesus reigns and is praying for us.

Anger and frustration - because Jesus is totally in control so we can stop trying to be.

Bitterness - because Jesus reigns and will avenge evil so we don’t have to.

Assurance of salvation - because yes, my faith is weak, but Jesus remains strong.

*The Gospel message is not that I worked my way to God and now I have to work hard to keep my spot there that was only tenuously granted by God. IT’s that Jesus did it:

⁵ Robert Murray McCheyne and Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne* (Edinburgh; London: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1894), 158.

Died.

Was buried.

Rose

And gives us the gift of faith

So if we receive Him by faith He receives us, forgives us completely, and keeps us. He then reigns over all things so that we can no longer be condemned, no longer removed from His presence. Not because we are strong enough to hang on to Him, but because He is strong enough to hang on to us. And He reigns.

Our boldness - because He's powerful and for us.

Our joyfulness - because He is totally in control.

Prayer of Confession

Jesus, you have ascended and are seated at the right hand of the throne of God the Father Almighty. Everything is under you, there is nothing too high for you. There is nothing you don't know, or don't see, or can't anticipate. Nothing is frustrating your plans. You rule over all things.

Father we thank you for sending your son to go to the lowest place in the cross and grave and in descending to the dead, to rise the third day, and to ascend to your right hand. Yet we confess that we often live like that's not true. We become fearful, we search for conspiracies, we become frustrated and angry.

Spirit, drive the truth of your complete reign into our hearts. We know that Jesus ascended so He could send His Spirit to minister to us, so we pray that you would. Help us believe so we can be assured and have a rollicking optimism like we are on top of the world, *however much the world seemed to be on top of us (Packer)*.

Assurance

Isaiah 44:22 ““I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.”

Works Cited During the Apostles' Creed Series (This is a Work in Progress)

Affirming the Apostles Creed by J. I. Packer

The Ascension of Christ by Patrick Schreiner

The Creedal Imperative by Carl Trueman

Christless Christianity by Michael Horton

Christian Apologetics by Cornelius Van Til

This book takes into account the “noetic effects” of sin. That is, sin corrupts our minds and our wills, so that scientific and philosophical proofs alone cannot lead us to God. The need is for the power of the Spirit to overcome the circular reasoning of the secular worldview. This book is a needed addition to the above books because it provides an explanation for how someone becomes savingly convinced of the faith.

The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way by Michael Horton

A unique and refreshing systematic theology that explains the major doctrines of the Christian Faith.

Christian Theology by Millard J. Erickson

This serious systematic theology textbook explores each of the main areas of theology, with a strong biblical foundation and fair treatment of opposing views.

The Deity of Christ edited by Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson

To Everyone an Answer, edited by Beckwith, Craig, and Moreland

This book presents the case for God's existence, for Christ, and for miracles. It answers philosophical, cultural, and religious challenges to the Christian faith. 20+ authors each write in an area of their specialty in this edited volume.

The Glory of Christ by John Owen. Available here: Owen, John; Spurgeon, Charles H.; Winslow, Octavius; Flavel, John; Plumer, William S.; Watson, Thomas. The Glory of Christ (Free Grace Broadcaster Book 244) . Chapel Library. Kindle Edition.

The Knowledge of the Holy by A.W. Tozer

Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne by Robert Murray McCheyne and Andrew A. Bonar

Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything by Kelly Weill.

Orthodoxy by G.K. Chesterton

Considered one of G. K. Chesterton's best works and a masterful apologetic, the British critic and philosopher makes compelling arguments here as to the rationale of belief and more. In its Preface, Chesterton writes that the purpose of this book is to "attempt an explanation, not of whether the Christian faith can be believed, but of how he personally has come to believe it."

The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories by Jan-Willem Van Prooijen

The Reason for God by Tim Keller

This book answers a number of common philosophical arguments against the existence of God, including the problem of evil. Keller's intelligent and humble approach

is helpful for those who doubt, for those who are skeptical, and for the believers aiming to help both see Jesus more clearly.

Reasonable Faith by William Lane Craig

This extensive work builds a case for the Christian faith starting with the existence of God, and then answering the problem of historical knowledge (which is important in proving the resurrection.) From there he explains who Jesus understood Himself to be, followed by an extensive historical proof for the resurrection of Jesus, and refutations of the claims against the resurrection.

Reformed Dogmatics by Harman Bavinck -

This is a four volume work on Christian Theology written by the great Dutch Calvinist theologian.

The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self by Carl Trueman.

This book explains so much of how modern people think of themselves. It expands on the corrupt way of thinking that jettisons the past and strives to find the true self in an unencumbered state of nature as opposed to in glorifying God and enjoying Him forever. This seeking after the self finds its expression in many facets of the sexual revolution, and explains why our culture is the way it is in our day.

Signature in the Cell by Steven C. Meyer

Westminster Shorter Catechism

This is one of the greatest summations of the Christian faith ever written by English speaking people.

What we Believe: Understanding and Confessing the Apostles' Creed by R.C. Sproul