

I Believe

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)*

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

I Believe In God
January 17th, 2020
Romans 1:18-32
Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Romans 1.

Over the next few months, we are going to be worshiping and studying our way through the Apostle's Creed. I believe that this study is going to be a corrective for us in a number of healthy ways.

For starters, I think this is going to provide a helpful corrective for that urge inside of us that wants to wage war over every minute detail of our doctrine. To be clear, it is important and helpful to draw lines around our doctrine. It is important to clearly specify what we believe about baptism, and church governance and a host of other secondary theological issues. But sometimes we can hold onto those secondary issues as if they were PRIMARY. Sometimes we draw a circle that is far too narrow with a line that is far too bold. Sometimes we look at those believers who disagree with us as if they are not our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Apostle's Creed draws a wider circle. It forces us to remember the primary doctrines of our faith and, as we recite this creed with Anglicans and Presbyterians and Pentecostals and Methodists, we should be reminded that in spite of our very real disagreements we are all members of the body of Christ. Al Mohler in his book on the Apostle's Creed captures this well. He writes:

All Christians believe more than is contained in the Apostles Creed, but none can believe less.¹

That's exactly right. The Creed brings us back to the basics. I hope and pray that our love and appreciation for the wider body of Christ will grow as a result of our study.

I also believe that our study of this Creed will provide a helpful rebuke for our strong, individualistic tendencies. Many in my generation view the reading of creeds and liturgy as expressions of cold, passionless traditionalism. Ben Myers in his book on the Apostle's Creed hits the nail on the head with this quote:

We assume that the truest thing we could ever say would be something we had made up ourselves.²

We are so suspicious of tradition. It doesn't feel "authentic" to us. But that way of thinking is really just arrogance dressed up as piety. Listen: The Apostle's Creed represents a statement of faith that has been proclaimed by the church almost from its inception! It presents the basic and essential doctrines of Christianity. Ben Myers notes of the Creed:

It is a summary of Christian teaching as well as a solemn pledge of allegiance.³

As early as the 300s, we find new believers reciting this Creed as they made their way into the waters of baptism. They proclaimed these words as an expression of their newfound faith – a faith that would likely cost them their livelihood, their families and, in many cases, their lives. So, would you refer to Creed as cold, passionless traditionalism? Maybe the problem is you!

When we recite this Creed together, we pledge allegiance to Christ! We align ourselves with our Christian brothers and sisters through the ages. We declare that the message that we preach and the hope that we have is the SAME doctrine that was handed down to us by the Apostles themselves! That is not to say that the Apostles wrote this Creed. They didn't. But this Creed is a summary of their Apostolic witness – the witness that has been passed down now for 2000 years.

¹ R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), xvi.

² Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed - A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 9.

³ Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed - A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 5.

This isn't cold *traditionalism*. This is life-giving, faith-inspiring *tradition*. And there is a world of difference between the two! Traditionalism fights about music preferences. Tradition delights in the wisdom passed down by our brothers and sisters through the ages. As Jaroslav Pelican once said:

Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.⁴

I LOVE that language. As you recite this Creed in the weeks to come, I want to challenge you to imagine the voices of the church through the last 2,000 years declaring these words with you. You are pledging allegiance to the LIVING FAITH OF THE DEAD!

Look with me now to the first words of this Creed:

I believe in God

Here we find the foundation for this creed and the foundation for our faith. Take a moment and think about how profound this short sentence is. By declaring those first four words, you have identified yourself as an “outsider” in this world. In a culture that celebrates and embraces scepticism and unbelief, you have declared: “Not me! Not my house! I believe in God.”

And, as we will see, this first confession changes EVERYTHING!

If you have your Bible at home, take a second and flip back to the very first verse in Genesis. Look at the first four words:

In the beginning, God (Genesis 1:1a ESV)

The Creed begins right where the Bible begins. Our faith begins right here. Everything that we believe about ourselves and the world – everything we believe about sin and grace – everything we believe about the life to come begins with our acknowledgement of the God who made us!

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), xxii.

The Book of Romans arguably contains the Apostle Paul's clearest and most thorough presentation of the gospel message. And, in the very first chapter in Romans, Paul begins with the existence of God. We cannot even begin to understand the gospel – we cannot understand guilt, or grace, or gratitude, or glory – without first humbling ourselves to proclaim: “I believe in God.”

Look with me now to our text for this morning. We will be considering Romans 1:18-32. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools,²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Romans 1:18-32 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is a wildly offensive passage, but not only for the reason that you think. I would argue that the most offensive truth in this passage is actually found in verse 19. There, Paul declares:

For what can be known about God **is plain to them**, because God has shown it to them. (Romans 1:19 ESV)

The “them” he is describing here is the entire world. He is describing all of mankind, and he says that God’s existence is PLAIN to everyone in the world. Everyone in the WORLD should be ready and willing to proclaim with us: I believe in God! Why? Well, Paul goes on to explain:

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Romans 1:20 ESV)

Paul argues that all of creation is making the case for its Creator. The human brain that surpasses the complexity of our most powerful computers testifies to the infinite knowledge of God. The incalculable immensity of the galaxies testifies to the unfathomable greatness of God. The beauty of the colours of spring testifies to the incomparable goodness of God. And all of this evidence together testifies to the undeniable existence of God.

If you believe that God’s word is true, then you need to store this truth away in your heart. It will make you a better evangelist. You will NEVER encounter a person in your lifetime who does not know that there is a God. Never.

And yet, you will meet many people who will CLAIM that they do not believe. Paul teaches us here that it’s not that they DON’T believe – it’s that they WON’T believe. They don’t want to. They don’t want to declare “I believe in God” so they adopt their own creed.

In our text this morning, the Apostle Paul is unpacking for us the enormous implications of denying the existence of God. What would happen if we took out the first four words of the Apostles Creed? What would happen if, instead of declaring: “I believe in God”, you decided to join your voice with the Unbeliever’s Creed and declared: “I don’t want to believe in God”?

What If I Don’t Want To Believe In God?

First, if you choose to join in with the unbelievers Creed – if you choose to declare: “I don’t want to believe in God”, then:

1. You will suppress the truth

Paul explains this in verse 18:

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, **who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.** (Romans 1:18 ESV)

Bertrand Russell was a famous atheistic philosopher and mathematician. He was once asked in an interview what he would say if he died and found himself face to face with God. He responded:

Not enough evidence God! Not enough evidence!⁵

Here is a sobering reminder: The man who gave us that quote is dead, and the hypothetical scenario that he casually laughed off in an interview has come to pass. Unless he experienced a miraculous humbling and conversion on his deathbed, this man brought his “lack of evidence” excuse to the God who clearly said:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them... **So they are without excuse.** (Romans 1:19,20b ESV)

There is no excuse for unbelief before our holy God. It's not that you are lacking evidence. It's that you are **WILLFULLY SUPPRESSING** the evidence! If you love your neighbour at all, then you had better warn them not to bring that damning excuse before the judgement seat of God.

In Luke's gospel, we are told the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man lived a life of unbelief and hedonism. He indulged in as much pleasure and hoarded as much treasure as he could in his short life. Then, he died, and he experienced the torment of hell. He cried out to Abraham for relief, but he found none. Then, he asked Abraham to command his old servant to go and warn his brothers. Abraham replied:

'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'" (Luke 16:27-31 ESV)

⁵ Attributed. As quoted in Wesley C. Salmon's "Religion and Science: A New Look at Hume's Dialogues," *Philosophical Studies* 33 (1978), p. 176. Also in the New York Times article *So God's Really in the Details?* (May 11, 2002)

“If they have more evidence, then they will believe!” That is the plan and the excuse of a person who does not understand the nature of unbelief. Unbelief is not an evidence issue. More evidence? Jesus Christ rose from the dead! If he were standing before the unbeliever with his nail-pierced hands today, they would STILL deny him! Because this isn’t an issue of evidence. It is an issue of DESIRE! A desire for autonomy, and pleasure – a desire to steal the place of God Himself – THAT is the source of unbelief. THAT is why evidence is suppressed.

Second, if you choose to join in with the unbelievers Creed – if you choose to declare: “I don’t want to believe in God”, then:

2. You will be given over to your lusts and passions

We see this language in verses 24 and 26:

Therefore **God gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves (Romans 1:24 ESV)

For this reason **God gave them up** to dishonorable passions. (Romans 1:26 ESV)

In our pride, we assume that what we want is obviously what is best. We are like little children in that way. My kids have a burning desire to eat candy all day long, and they assume that I am withholding that experience from them because I am a miserly old man. They have no idea what a lifetime diet of sugar and food colouring would do to them, but they are pretty confident that – whatever the outcome – it will be FAR better than the trajectory that I am setting them on with all my grains and vegetables. As parents, we do what is best for our kids. And they often resent us for it.

Our kids provide a cute illustration of a problem that is not cute in the slightest. In our sinfulness and our arrogance, we have nothing but distrust and disdain for God’s plan. We run full speed in the direction of sin and rebellion, and we close our eyes to every sign of the ruin that lies ahead.

Just look out your window. At this very moment, we are ACTIVELY WORKING to raise up a new generation that has no idea what it is to be a man or a woman. The idea that God has made us male and female is considered hate speech. Our culture teaches that sex is little more than a hobby and that the limitation of sex to the confines of marriage is archaic and oppressive.

God has given us over to our lusts and passions. Our kids are confused and depressed like never before. Our untamed lusts are naturally leading to unplanned pregnancies. Our untamed lusts have left us with 47,885 children in the Canadian foster care system.⁶ Our untamed lusts led to 85,195 reported abortions in Canada in 2018.⁷ From 2007 to 2018, there have been 1,168,675 abortions reported in Canada alone.⁸ To put that number in perspective, that is 189,324 MORE people than the entire population of Nova Scotia.⁹

Why am I saying all of this? This isn't a sermon on sex or abortion... How does this fit?

Sometimes we throw around these philosophical and theological ideas, but we don't stop to consider the real-life implications of what we have read. So, let's be painfully blunt. If you choose to declare: "I don't want to believe in God", then you will be given over to your lusts and desires. And what does it mean that God gives us over to our lusts and desires? Well, for starters, it means the government funded, legalized murder of a million babies.

And the crazy thing is, if you choose to go along with the Unbeliever's Creed, then none of what I just said will even bother you because:

3. You will celebrate things that should be mourned

That's what Paul goes on to say. Look at verse 28:

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, **they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.** (Romans 1:28-32 ESV)

Not only are we given over to our lusts and passions, but we also celebrate them. This manifests itself in a number of ways, but since I've just finished highlighting those abortion statistics, let's use that as our case

⁶ As of August 4, 2020. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/hlt-fst/fam/Pages/highlight.cfm?TabID=1&Lang=E&Asc=0&PRCode=01&OrderBy=8&Sex=1&tableID=304> Accessed January 12, 2021.

⁷ <https://www.arcc-cdac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/statistics-abortion-in-canada.pdf> Accessed January 12, 2021.

⁸ <https://www.arcc-cdac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/statistics-abortion-in-canada.pdf> Accessed January 12, 2021.

⁹ <https://novascotia.ca/finance/statistics/news.asp?id=16179> Accessed January 12, 2021.

study. Those numbers make me want to crumble to the floor and weep. And yet, in a recent City News article it was reported:

When it comes to the issue of abortion as a whole, Canadians largely find abortion acceptable, at 70 per cent.¹⁰

A million lives lost won't put a damper on our non-stop celebration of freedom and autonomy. One side of the political spectrum wages war with everything that God's Word says about sex and gender while the other side of the spectrum celebrates and makes excuses for the gross immorality of their favorite political champion. North America is on FIRE right now.

Look again at the text. Now look out your window. This IS Romans 1! We are living it!

THIS is the inevitable outcome of the Unbelievers Creed. I don't want to believe in God; therefore, I am going to sacrifice a million children on the altar of my freedom and autonomy. And then I'm going to call it GOOD.

This is why we have decided to stop here, after only four words of our study through the Apostle's Creed.

In a world of unbelief and arrogance and confusion and chaos I BELIEVE IN GOD! In a world where morality is relative and the rules change every day, I BELIEVE IN GOD! My neighbour believes in himself and my coworker believes in her Prime Minister and my hairdresser believes in Darwin but I BELIEVE IN GOD!

These four words have MASSIVE implications.

I Believe in God

I believe in God; therefore:

1. I acknowledge my dependence

I declare with the Psalmist:

¹⁰ <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2020/01/31/canada-abortion-poll-2020/> Accessed January 12, 2021.

I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?
² My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1-2 ESV)

I cannot fix this world. I cannot fix this city. I can't even fix MYSELF! But I know the One who can. I happily, eagerly, JOYFULLY acknowledge that I am completely dependent on Him.

I am not God. I am not the center of the universe. I do not think more highly of myself than I ought. I am a creature, and I am entirely dependent upon my Creator. And I think that is GREAT news!

Every breath in my lungs is from Him. Every gust of wind and every crashing wave answers to Him. Kings and Presidents will all bow down before Him. I happily acknowledge my dependence.

Second, I believe in God, therefore:

2. I hang on His every word

The One who hung the stars in place and set the planets in motion is more than capable of leading my life. Therefore, while the crowd sings, "I did it my way" I will sing a different tune. I do it HIS way! I am NOT the author of the universe and I do NOT have the authority to decide right from wrong. I am like a child living in his Father's house. I have my ideas of what might be best, but whenever my ideas contradict His commands, I happily fall in line. I sing along with the Psalmist:

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord!
² Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart, (Psalm 119:1-2 ESV)

I believe in God; therefore, every morning I open my Bible because I know that I need to hear from Him. In faith I ask the Holy Spirit to open my eyes again to behold the glories that I need to see in His Word. When I encounter things in the Bible that contradict my own opinions and preferences, I surrender my opinions and preferences because I genuinely believe that His way is right! I look back at my painful past and I remember the outcome of a life lived MY way. I will never go back. I want to do life His way and so, with humility and expectation, I hang on His every word.

Further, I believe in God; therefore:

3. I agree with His assessment of me

He tells me that I possess unimaginable worth, and that I am capable of unfathomable evil.

I am made in the image of God. I am not simply one more animal, as the world would have me believe, but I am an image bearer of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords! He made me to rule over His creation on His behalf. He made me for meaningful work and for soul-satisfying enjoyment of Him and of His creation. He fashioned me from the dust and made me to be an eternal being that will exist forever!

And yet, I also bear the image of my father Adam. I am a sinner who sins. I have rolled in the mud of rebellion and wickedness and my soul cries out with the Psalmist:

Because of your wrath there is no health in my body;
there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.
⁴ My guilt has overwhelmed me
like a burden too heavy to bear. (Psalm 38:3-4 NIV)

I believe in God; therefore, I know that I am not God. I am a man. A man who has willfully broken the commandments of the living God. A man who needs forgiveness. I know that there is nothing that I can do in my own strength to earn that redemption. There is only One who has the power to grant my pardon.

I believe in God; therefore:

4. I place all of my trust in His plan of redemption

No politician can solve the problem that resides in my heart. No apology could erase the evil things that I've done. No good deeds will ever compensate for the times when I have turned a blind eye to the needs around me.

I have sinned against the infinitely holy God. I have spat in the face of the Creator of heaven and earth. I am a rebel against the perfect King. There is nowhere I could go to hide from His presence. There is nothing I could offer that could satisfy His just and holy wrath against my sin.

But God has graciously provided me with a means of forgiveness. Out of His overflowing love and mercy, God sent His own Son to satisfy my debt so that I could once and for all receive forgiveness and redemption! I believe in God; therefore, I place ALL of my trust in His plan. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to His cross I cling! I hide myself in the Rock of Ages, and I know that I am safe.

Finally, I believe in God; therefore:

5. I Live for His glory

This is my Father's world. He has graciously shared it with me for my enjoyment, but it belongs to Him. It all belongs to Him. And I belong to Him too. I have been purchased out of the death that I deserved by the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. My life is a testimony to His grace! I hear the Apostle Paul's command:

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31 ESV)

Amen! That is my chief ambition. That is what I was created for. I exist to serve Him. I exist to enjoy Him. I exist to worship Him. I exist to be a living, breathing object lesson of His tremendous grace and mercy. He is the Creator of this universe. He is the Author of this story. He is the Alpha and the Omega – the First and the Last. I am a creature, but He is God! And I believe.

This is the declaration of our brothers and sisters in Christ through the ages, and it is a great honour that we can join their voices in faith to declare it once again today. These four words change EVERYTHING, and I want to invite you to say them with me as we conclude.

I believe in God.

Amen. Let's pray.