

**WE BELIEVE IN GOD**  
*SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH*  
By Steve Zeisler

**The Nicene Creed**

“We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.  
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.” (1)

This creed is a statement of convictions that are common to faithful Christian communities of all types—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant, found on every continent. It also connects us to the people of God of other times. Christians have believed these truths since the age of the apostles, and have had them articulated in roughly this form for almost seventeen hundred years.

We have begun a sermon series on Hebrews 11. That chapter is, of course, filled with respect for faith. It is a survey of the history of the people of God. We'll read accounts of faith from long before the birth of the church in the first century. Verse 2 speaks of Old-Testament saints, the ancients whose faith is commended by God. In 12:1 they are observed cheering for us who are running the race today.

As we think of ourselves participating in the history of what God is doing today, connected to those who have gone before, the text we're going to look at will take us back beyond every person we find in the Old-Testament story, beyond even the first human pair, to the creation itself. Psalm 19:1 reminds us,

“The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
And their expanse is declaring the work of his hands.”

The song of the creation praising its Maker is billions of years old.

It's good for us to have a sense of our history, to hear the voices that have gone before, to attend to the lessons that those before us, particularly the creation itself, can teach us about living by faith.

We have read a creed and we are going to read a text of Scripture, and in doing so we affirm Christian doctrine. This is all in the face of a furious new wave of antagonism to faith in books, articles, media presentations, professional societies, and elsewhere. Books with a theme of attacking faith, rejecting historic beliefs, dot the bestseller lists. Some have sold more than a million copies. These books claim that religion promotes violence and degrades human society, that faith is a form of deadly virus, and that teaching children to pray amounts to child abuse.

So on the one hand there is a well-promoted effort to take from the human experience all belief in God. On the other hand there are people like us who meet together knowing that we're part of a long work of God. We declare creeds, we read the Bible, we pray, and we affirm the opposite—that life has no meaning apart from the love of God.

Let's look at our text, Hebrews 11:1-3. The heart of it is what we can learn from the testimony of the created world.

**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.**

Verse 1 makes two important assertions.

## **Assured of the future**

First, faith allows us to base our lives on what we hope for. Some events that can give us direction and purpose are invisible to us because they're in the future. We can't observe and measure them, but they exist nonetheless. God has determined them. God, of course, is not constrained by time, and he's not waiting for events to play themselves out, uncertain about what will happen next. And he has given us some information about what lies ahead. So by faith we can say we know what's coming, even though we can't see it, and therefore we can live lives of purpose and direction and wisdom in the present.

How do we think about something like that? I want to expand a bit on an illustration Jesus used to describe conduct in the present that is shaped by events that haven't happened yet. Speaking to his disciples just before he died, he said, "A little while, and you will no longer see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me." (John 16:16.) He was going to leave them, but there was coming a day when he would return. To help them understand that, he used this analogy: "Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world." (16:21.)

We can expand Jesus' analogy to include the entire pregnancy, ending in labor and childbirth. When a couple discovers that they are going to have a baby, it changes how they think about everything else in the interim. In the same way, we know God's promises are certain, and accordingly we adjust our lives, our actions, our hopes, our feelings.

It's been more than twenty-seven years now, but I can remember the three occasions when Leslie and I were anticipating the birth of a child. Some elements of pregnancy and childbirth are very difficult. Severe morning sickness, combining exhaustion and nausea, is awful. Yet the effect is different from similar symptoms caused by illness. It won't last, and something beautiful is on the horizon. There are also some good elements of pregnancy. I remember the first time we were able to feel our child move inside Leslie, just being astonished at the feeling, and realizing we loved someone we hadn't met yet. There are new prayers, new concerns, and new financial responsibilities, the bedroom to paint and furniture to buy. Some of it is hard, some of it is wonderful. But all of it anticipates the day when the baby is going to come.

That's the point of the first clause of Hebrews 11:1. By faith we can say no to despair today. "I am not going to have morning sickness forever." "The difficult world that I live in right now is not going to last forever." The King is going to return someday. The new world is going to be born. The Bridegroom will come for his bride. We know how the story ends, so we can strengthen others and be strengthened by them to face whatever hard things are happening right now.

This also means that we don't have to give in to deceptive sales pitches. The tempter will say that you've got to grab for all the gusto you can right now. You only go around once in life, and all there is is now, so maximize pleasure and minimize pain. But that's like saying, "Don't save for the baby. Don't rearrange your life to be a parent. Go party in Vegas, because who knows what the future has?" The voice of faith says, "I'm not going to live as if I don't know the future. I do know the future. I know that someday Jesus and I will talk about my life, and I want to be commended by him. And I because I know that, I will choose wisely in the present."

## Certain of things not seen

The second phrase of Hebrews 11:1 notes that we not only know things that are in the future, but we also have certainty about things in the present that are invisible. “Faith is...the conviction of things not seen.” They exist right now. God’s power and purpose, the angels who serve him, the angels who have rebelled against him—an entire world of spiritual beings—all exist yet are hidden from our sight. We have information about them, but we can’t prove them, measure them, or express them in mathematical terms.

What difference does it make that we are a temple of the Holy Spirit? What difference does it make that we are held in the hands of the living God, that his eyes are on us, that his love never fails? Well, if these assertions are true, they make all the difference in the world, don’t they?

Many people who are familiar with the Bible, Jews and Christians both, have a great affection for Psalm 23, the simple illustration of a shepherd and his sheep. The thing that’s great about Psalm 23 is all of the present-tense statements:

“The LORD *is* my shepherd...  
He *makes* me lie down in green pastures;  
He *leads* me beside quiet waters....

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...  
You *are* with me.  
You *prepare* a table before me in the presence of my enemies....”

In the good places, the still waters, the good gifts in life, God is there. In the scary places, the valleys of deep darkness, God is there. In the presence of enemies, he nourishes us. What makes this psalm so beautiful is the recognition that there is no place we go where he is no longer with us, where we are abandoned.

God is invisible, but he’s present. There are realities that have not yet occurred, but they’re certain. And because by faith we can apprehend these things, our life takes on meaning. We are strengthened, given hope, connected to others, shaped by the truth of the gospel.

The importance of what we call spiritual disciplines becomes apparent here. Why do we read the Bible? Why do we have regular times of prayer? Why do we worship with other folks? Because in all of these things we are reminding ourselves of what’s true, though we can’t touch it. We are standing on a foundation that is invisible to us, but secure. We are stepping into the invisible world, reminding ourselves of future things.

At this point I recommend you spend some time in quiet. Maybe you haven’t taken time for a while to give thanks to the One who has been your companion and has cared for you in special ways. Or maybe you’re in difficulty and you need to ask for help. But because of the faith that allows you to be certain of the future and aware of the invisible realities in the present, take this opportunity to pray. Below are a few truths found in God’s word to meditate on:

“There will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain...” (Revelation 21:4.)

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” (Matthew 5:6.)

“Death is swallowed up in victory.” (1 Corinthians 15:54.)

“Love never fails.” (1 Corinthians 13:8.)

Now let’s come back to our study. We’ve said that because we know the future and we know of realities in the present, we are strengthened in our faith, given meaning in life. But we’re given instruction about the past as well.

## **Created by the word of God**

Hebrews 11:3 directly challenges the modern atheist movement: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.”

Note that the universe exists by God’s speech, which means it has meaning and purpose. A wise and loving God, speaking thoughtfully, made things as they are—the brilliance and wonder of the physical world, the significance of human beings made in his image. Invisible realities come before and rank higher than the physical creation.

Opponents of religion argue that the opposite is true, that the physical world has produced complex beings (humans) who invent stories of invisible gods. In this view the uncaused physical world creates spiritual fictions.

It’s instructive to observe people on each side of this division. Among the most brilliant and celebrated scientific minds in the world are those who believe that God made it all. And there are those who love the history and tradition of religion without having any interest in knowing God (if he exists). This is not a chasm that divides science and religion. There are religious people on both sides of the chasm, and there are scientific people on both sides of the chasm. The difference is whether they believe that behind the world of our experience there is a living and personal God who wants to know us and be known by us.

Note, too, that there are important debates among believers as to how God made everything, how we should understand the opening chapters of Genesis. Were all of God’s actions miraculous? Or did he choose to use the laws of physics and biological development that he himself created to effect diversity in the world as we know it? These debates are important and worth having, and I think Christians will always come to different answers in these things. There will always be different points of view over what Genesis actually teaches. Love and humility should prevail. But the most important question raised for us in verse 3 is this: Did God create what exists? Or did the material world invent belief in God?

In every generation over the last four hundred years, books have been written denouncing God, faith, the evils of religion, and so on. So we shouldn't be particularly surprised by them. One repeated concern is, "Unless we rescue the world from religion, all the wonders of science are in jeopardy. All these stupid religious people are denying science and darkening the minds of children."

But I think the best arguments say the opposite. If the world is only random, if human value is arbitrary, if beauty and ethics and purpose and a call to courage are whims of the moment, if there is no foundation, then there's no reason to attempt anything at all that's difficult. Science thrives in a setting where it is assumed that the grand things that we're finding are there on purpose, and that discovery of new ideas is valuable in its own right. The fear that growth in religion is antithetical to good science is backward. It's people who are hopeful who do great things. And in the long run, meaninglessness, godlessness, and relentless subjectivity all undermine any reason for doing more than serving oneself.

Richard Dawkins, one of the angry public atheists of our day, wrote this:

"In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces, and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference." (2)

He is saying selfish genes can account for everything that human beings experience. If that's true, every notion of justice, love, and beauty is a sham.

The speech of God made the world. The speech of God also communicates love—that he made us for himself, that when we experience beauty, it's his gift to us, that our choices make a difference. You and I, made in God's image, redeemed by his Son, intended to reign with him forever, have every reason to rejoice always and to pursue holiness.

These verses in Hebrews say that by faith we can lay hold of what we can't see. We can take the future and bring it into the present so life makes sense. We can acknowledge that God is here now even though we can't see him. We hear the testimony of creation itself, the glory of God being sung by the cosmos, the oldest song in the world. By faith we can find our place. By faith we can be assured that our struggles are not going to go on forever. By faith love grows, and so we are offered what the world cannot give—life.

## Notes

1. *The Nicene Creed*, translated by the International Consultation on English Texts (ICET), © 1975, internet: [www.creeds.net/ancient/nicene.htm](http://www.creeds.net/ancient/nicene.htm).
2. Richard Dawkins, "God's Utility Function," *Scientific American*, November 1995. P. 85.

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