Handout for Apostles’ Creed: Almighty

Last session, we considered the beginning of “The Apostles’ Creed” by looking at different creeds and considering the significance of “I believe.” We suggested that the statement probably began as a confession made at baptism and compared it with the “Nicene Creed” which reads, “We believe.” The former emphasizes personal belief while the latter emphasizes church unity of belief. Last session, we emphasized, “I believe in the Father,” stopping before the “Almighty” which follows. By so doing, we emphasized God as the source from which we come (though we’ll do that again when we consider Him as Creator), nurturing (caring for those He loves), providing (giving what His children need), disciplining (providing correction for His children), and being actively, creatively involved in the lives of those He loves.

We also considered why portraying God as Father might be problematic to modern audiences without understanding the fullness of God’s nature. We recognized that it might sound too patriarchal and seem, understood erroneously to support a misogynistic view. The use of “Father” might be particularly unhelpful to those who had “bad” fathers. It may sound too sexual, personifying God as only male as opposed to the biblical image of God reflected in creating male and female. For others, it may seem “too earthly,” bringing God Who is transcendent and all-powerful down to the mundane, ordinary level. We need to be sensitive to these wrong perceptions and that’s why we studied the scriptural underpinning of the term in the last setting.

First off, what do we mean when we say that God is Almighty? Our evangelical Anglican scholar, Michael Bird, defines it as: “To say that God is “almighty” is to say that he possesses all might. His power is not limited by anything beyond his own character and being. God always works to bring about what he intends to do, and not a single molecule in the universe can thwart him or frustrate his purposes. [Bird, Michael F.. *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016), p. 65.]

That makes good sense. The early church fathers, Clement and Barnabas used similar terms. Clement referred to Lord Almighty and Master of All Things while Barnabas addressed the Lord Who governs the whole universe. “At this period the title ‘almighty’ connoted God’s all-pervading control and sovereignty over reality, just as ‘Father’ referred primarily to His role as creator and author of all things.” [Kelly, J. N. D., *Early Christian Doctrines: Second Edition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960—original, 1958), p. 83.

Where does this idea of “Almighty” come from? As one might expect, it comes from the Old Testament. It is how God identifies Himself to Abraham in Genesis 17:1. It is pronounced “ehl shad-deye.” It is made from a combination of a generic divine name (from both Canaanite and Ugaritic) to which an adjectival or descriptive name is added. In this case, “Of the many etymologies suggested for the name, we have argued in the past that the best derivation of the name was from “breast,” “mountain.” [Cross, Frank Moore, “אל ‘el” in Botterweck, G. Johannes and Helmer Ringreen (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament: Volume I* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original, 1970), pp. 256-257.] The same word means both “breast” and “mountain,” so it has an interesting covalence of meaning as both nurturing and formidable.

The idea of “might” coming from the mountain can be tied to a combination of factors: a) they are large in size, b) they jut into the physical atmosphere suggesting a route to the “heavens” beyond, c) they are the best places to build fortresses since one always wants the high ground to defend (or to charge down from), and d) their proximity to the “heavens” of God’s throne would suggest that powerful God could come down on humans with which God was displeased. It seems to emphasize that God is both remote from human affairs and yet, close enough to get involved.

That they expected God to get involved can easily be seen when Isaac blesses Jacob before sending him off to avoid Esau’s homicidal wrath. And in Genesis 48:3, Jacob tells his clan that God Almighty blessed him when he had his vision of the ziggurat going up to heaven at Luz, Bethel (found in Genesis 28).

We also know that God Almighty is identified with Yahweh. In Exodus 3, God gave His name to Moses as Yahweh. When the people reject Moses in Exodus 5, God’s word of reassurance that comes in Exodus 6 reads: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty but by my name the LORD [Yahweh], I did not make myself known to them.” [Exodus 6:3 NIV] That’s kind of interesting since the Caesarean Creed that influenced the original Nicene Creed from A.D. 325 and the even longer creed associated with Theodosius (of St. Sophia fame) had adopted in A. D. 381 read: “We believe in one God, the Father All-Sovereign, …” [Bettensen, Henry (ed.), Documents of the Christian Church: Second Edition (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 24-26.] Indeed, even 2 Corinthians 6:18 combines the emphasis on God’s power and sovereignty with the nurturing Father—so much like our creedal statement: “I believe in God the Father Almighty.

So, when we look at this name for God in the Old Testament, we see that there are two foci that establish God’s claim to being “almighty” or “sovereign:” “God is sovereign over the cosmos, and God is sovereign over God’s own people, Israel.” [Birch, Bruce C. (et. al.), *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: Second Edition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005—original, 1999), p. 219.]

But the idea of the Almighty, sometimes expressed with the word “omnipotent” and sometimes, with the word “sovereign” as in the Nicene Creeds, is frightening to modern audiences. We don’t like anything absolute. Absolute is threatening. And so, we hear arguments such as the one shared by C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*: “It is common enough in argument with an unbeliever, to be told that God, if he existed and were good, would do this or that; and then, if we point out that the proposed action is impossible, to be met with the retort, ‘But I thought God was supposed to be able to do anything.’” [Lewis, C. S., *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 27.]

Lewis goes on to note that we then have to consider what “possible” and “impossible” might mean. But, if you had a chance to look at those quotations I sent and to consider if you agree or disagree, you might find something helpful. Let’s try some of them.

The first was: \_\_\_\_ AGREE \_\_\_\_ DISAGREE “God is Almighty, and yet though Almighty, He cannot die, cannot be deceived, cannot lie, and, as the Apostle says, ‘cannot deny Himself.’ How many things that He cannot do, and yet is Almighty, yea therefore is Almighty because He cannot do these things.”

Augustine of Hippo, “A Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed” in George, Timothy (ed.), *Augustine: On Christian Doctrine and Selected Introductory Works* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2022), p. 170. [C]

Indeed, the very idea of God’s absolute power is frightening to some. That’s why I chose the second quotation.

\_\_\_\_ AGREE \_\_\_\_ DISAGREE “God’s sovereign presence in the creaturely world is to be understood in this concrete way. It is not the presence of a compelling fate, nor that of a higher power of nature. Nor is it the presence of a dictator or tyrant brutalizing the world he controls. It is the presence of the almighty Word of God. It is effective in supreme power, but it operates as it speaks and is heard. It is an almighty address and summons.”

Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics: III.2: The Doctrine of Creation*, G. W. Bromiley (trans.) (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 2004—original 1960), p. 148. [R]

To quote Michael Bird again, since he comes from a different denomination than Barth but summarizes Barth’s position well, “God’s power is the reason why we trust in him to do all things for us, in us, and even through us. God’s limitless power is why we can place limitless faith in him, knowing that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask of him.” [Bird, p. 66.]

\_\_\_\_ AGREE \_\_\_\_ DISAGREE “The Bible teaches us on the one hand that the power of God extends beyond that which is realized, Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:27; Zech 8:6; Matt. 3:9; 26:53. We cannot say therefore that what God does not bring to realization, is not possible for Him.”

Berkhof, Louis, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1941), p. 80. [R]

One of the biblical accounts that most reminds me of this idea of God’s power being more than we can understand yet brought to bear for our benefit is 2 Kings 6:8-23. You may remember that Elisha the prophet is being sought out by a large enemy force. His servant is worried that this is going to be the end for both of them, but Elisha prays for his servant’s eyes to be opened. When God answers the prayer, the servant sees the heavenly host, God’s army, all round about them. He knows that God’s power is significantly greater than the power of the enemy. It’s right there with Jeremiah 32:27 that Louis Berkhof referred to in the last slide: “I am the LORD [Yahweh], the God of all mankind, is anything too hard for me?” [NIV]

And getting back to that C. S. Lewis question, hear what the Swiss Reformed theologian had to say about the bogus argument Lewis cites:

\_\_\_\_ AGREE \_\_\_\_ DISAGREE “God is Free and Sovereign Lord, whose power cannot be limited by anyone or anything. God is free to take the course of nature which He has created into account or not, to preserve it, or to bring it to an end.”

Brunner, Emil, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics: I*, Olive Wyon (trans.) (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1950), p. 250. [R]

\_\_\_\_ AGREE \_\_\_\_ DISAGREE “[Omnipotence is] characterized by the fact that (1) God in creating out of nothing is not tied to any pre-existent matter but has power over matter, too, and that (2), again in sovereign freedom and hence in virtue of omnipotence, God calls a creature to be his counterpart and partner, and addresses it as Thou (Gen. 1:28; 2:16), thus endowing it with personal responsibility.”

Thielicke, Helmut, *The Evangelical Faith: Volume II: The Doctrine of God and of Christ*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley (trans.) (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1997—original 1973), p. 54. [L]

Let’s start with opinion. The following are quotations from various theologians of various Christian denominations from throughout history. Read the quotation and then, share if you agree or disagree by placing an “X” in the appropriate space. We will give you a chance to share your thoughts right after Pastor Johnny’s introduction. After you share on each quotation, Pastor Johnny will reveal the theologian and his denomination.

\_\_\_\_ AGREE \_\_\_\_ DISAGREE “[Omnipotence is] characterized by the fact that (1) God in creating out of nothing is not tied to any pre-existent matter but has power over matter, too, and that (2), again in sovereign freedom and hence in virtue of omnipotence, God calls a creature to be his counterpart and partner, and addresses it as Thou (Gen. 1:28; 2:16), thus endowing it with personal responsibility.”

And look, just because they are theologians, and they use sacred language or biblical citations doesn’t mean you have to agree on all points. So, you get to decide.

Meanwhile, we need to look at **Old Testament justification for God as the Almighty.**

Genesis 17:1 God identifies as God Almighty to whom? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 What was he supposed to do? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Genesis 28:3 How is God Almighty used in this verse? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Genesis 35:11 After God Almighty identifies Himself to Jacob, what is Jacob supposed to do?
 Be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Genesis 43:14 What was God Almighty supposed to have done? Given \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Genesis 48:3 Where did Jacob say that God Almighty blessed him? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (Bethel)

Exodus 6:3 What name is used in parallel with God Almighty? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Job 5:17 mentions the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of the Almighty

Job 6:4 talks about the Almighty’s \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ similar to Job 5:17

Psalm 91:1 refers to protection as the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of the Almighty

Ezekiel 1:24 says that Ezekiel heard the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of the Almighty

**New Testament Ideas about the Almighty**

2 Corinthians 6:18 describes the Almighty as being a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Revelation 15:3 describes the Almighty as just and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Revelation 21:22 says Almighty and Lamb are the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Questions We May Ask:**

1. Does the idea of God Almighty seem reasonable?
2. Does the idea of God Almighty seem relevant to ordinary life?
3. Does the idea of God Almighty cheapen the idea of personal responsibility?
4. Does the idea of God Almighty fit into a scientific model of any kind?