

SERIES: This We Believe
 SERMON: **I Believe in God the Father**
 SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 40
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 DATE: April 6, 2008

This is the first in a new two-month series of sermons that I am really excited about. It's entitled *This We Believe*. In late June our denomination will be voting on a new Statement of Faith, the first revision in 58 years. Some denominations have revised their statements of faith because the old ones are too restrictive for an enlightened age and a more tolerant culture. But our new SOF has maintained all the doctrinal distinctives the Free Church has always had—it's just a more careful formulation of those distinctives.

I have been called to preach the Word of God, not doctrinal statements. But what I want to do in this series is to present basic Bible truth using the eight principal topics that are addressed in our new Statement of Faith. Those topics are, God the Father, the Bible, mankind, Jesus Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit, the church, and the future. The specific statement on God the Father is found in Article One:

We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

Obviously that only scratches the surface of the nature and character of God, but then even the most scholarly theology book ever written has only scratched the surface. Please understand that in 35-40 minutes today I can only offer an overview, but that's what this series is all about. Sometimes it's valuable to get the big picture, the view from 30,000 feet; we'll leave the details for another day. Let's then fasten our seat belts as we begin this morning with the simple question,

How can I know that God exists?

There are two kinds of arguments for the existence of God: naturalistic arguments and faith arguments.

Naturalistic arguments. The natural theology arguments are as old as human reasoning, but they were developed to an art form by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. I will mention only three of them.

1. The cosmological argument looks at the cosmos, the universe as we know it and asks, "How do we explain all this? It demands the existence of some Adequate Cause." Only two causes are seriously debated today: organic evolution and God. Both positions take faith, but frankly I think evolution takes more faith, because while it does its best to explain the development of life, it

has no answers at all for the ultimate origin of life. (By the way, a new movie featuring one of my favorite cultural commentators, Ben Stein, will be hitting the theaters in the very near future. It's called *Expelled*, and it focuses on the loss of freedom of conscience and thought in the scientific community due to their refusal to tolerate any dissent to Darwinism. I, of course, haven't seen it yet, but I plan to go and I encourage you to go as well).

The Bible actually uses the cosmological argument several times, like in Psalm 19:1-3:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.*

2. The anthropological argument contends that since man is a personal, moral, religious, creative, intelligent being, therefore His Creator must also have these characteristics. This argument is also used in Scripture—in Acts 17:29. When speaking to the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill Paul says, “Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill.” No, instead the Creator must be alive, and must actually be greater than the creature.

3. The teleological argument is that used by the Intelligent Design advocates. It says, “The universe exhibits design, adaptation, and purpose. Therefore, it must have been produced by an Intelligent Creator.” If you were walking along a seashore and found a watch, would you ever think the watch just happened spontaneously or would you assume the existence of an intelligent “watchmaker.”

Well, there is design in the human body that is so intricate that it makes a Swiss watch look like a random mishmash of unrelated parts. We see design and purpose in everything from the smallest atoms to the largest galaxies, from the rain cycles to the food chain. In fact, scientists can tell us when the next eclipse will occur down to the very minute, though it is years away. Is all this just the result of random processes over billions of years, or is it evidence of intelligent design?

All three of these arguments for God's existence are useful, but they are also limited in that while they offer strong evidence for the existence of a Creator God, they do not tell us what kind of God exists. The evidence is actually ambiguous. Nature speaks, for example, of a God of great creative power, but how do we know whether that God is good or evil? There are certainly some factors that point to His benevolence—like gorgeous weather and fertile ground and incredible mountains; but there are also earthquakes and famines and cancer.

Furthermore, to reason from the creature to the creator is always going to leave a gap, since man is not only moral, religious, and intelligent; he can also be evil, destructive, and ignorant. And while purpose and design are evident in the universe, there is also plenty of chaos and

randomness as well.

I doubt if anyone can be brought into the kingdom of God solely by means of these arguments, but I believe they establish a presumption in favor of the existence of the God of the Bible. Yet far more persuasive to the believer are the faith arguments for God's existence, and I would like to mention three of them:

Faith arguments

1. The witness of Scripture (Genesis 1:1, Psalm 14:1). The Bible begins with God in Genesis 1:1, not trying to prove His existence but assuming it as foundational to everything else. It then offers a coherent interpretation of history, culture, society, values, and human life based upon the existence of a sovereign God. The Bible also addresses those who don't believe in God: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1). In other words, atheism is not a position of intelligence and sophistication, as it is so often portrayed, but rather of ignorance and foolishness. It is foolish because it denies clear evidence to the contrary and does so to both the temporary and eternal detriment of the one who denies God.

2. The witness of Jesus Christ regarding the existence of God is given in John 14:9, as well as many other places: "He who has seen me has seen the Father." To know Jesus is to know God, plain and simple. To not know Jesus is to be ignorant of God. (1 John 2:23).

3. The witness of the Holy Spirit is subjective but powerful: Rom. 8:16 says, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." You can't put the witness of the Spirit in a test tube; you can't submit it to philosophical analysis; but everyone who has experienced it knows how powerful it is.

Ultimately, however, we must admit that God's existence is a presupposition rather than a provable claim. The question is, "Is it a *reasonable* presupposition that adequately accounts for the facts as we know them? Is it faith based upon reliable information and evidence, as opposed to blind faith?" I believe it is.

Since I doubt if we have too many agnostics or atheists here this morning, I will say no more about whether God exists. Rather I will postulate another question:

How can I know what God is like?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism answers the question this way: "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." That's good, but it by no means describes God completely. In fact, I believe the best we can do is to list and describe a number of His attributes and characteristics that He Himself has revealed in His Word—all the while recognizing that He is more than the sum of His parts. We can have true knowledge of Him, though certainly not complete knowledge. We "know in part and we see in a mirror dimly." Nevertheless, what we know we know.

By the way, theologians have generally divided the attributes of God into two kinds: incommunicable and communicable. We use those terms of diseases to indicate things we can catch as opposed to those we cannot. That's sort of what we mean here as well. There are some characteristics of God which we can "catch," that is, we can share in them to a certain degree. Attributes like holiness, justice, goodness, truth, etc., have a counterpart in man, though certainly not a perfect counterpart. But there are other attributes of God which have no counterpart in man. For example, the omni's—omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence—are incommunicable, as are infinity and immutability. We will never share these characteristics with God.

I have listed about twenty of God's key characteristics in your outline, and we will do our best to provide at least a basic understanding of each this morning.

God is spirit. (John 4:24) In John 4:24 we read, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." There are two important implications of this attribute. First, if God is spirit (and we are not saying that He *has* a spirit, but that He *is* spirit), then it follows that He is immaterial, i.e. He does not have a body. Of course, the Bible sometimes speaks of God's powerful right arm, of His eyes searching His children, and of His feet walking swiftly to justice, but these are clearly anthropomorphisms—that is, descriptions of God in human-like form so that we can grasp His nature better. Mormons take these references literally because it bolsters their view that God was once a human like we are and we will one day be gods like He is, but such a view contradicts the Bible's teaching about God's spiritual nature.

A second implication is that if God is spirit, He is invisible. 1 Tim. 6:16 says that "no man has seen God or can see Him" and 1 Tim. 1:17 adds, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, *invisible*, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." Since God is invisible we must refrain from all kinds of idolatry. Listen to Moses' exhortation in Deuteronomy 4:15-19:

You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Sinai out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.

Images of God dishonor Him because they obscure His glory and convey false ideas about Him.

God is infinite. (1 Kings 8:27) Infinity is one of those words which can only be defined negatively, like *baldness* or *orphan*. It means having no boundaries, measureless, limitless. We sometimes use the term like this: "the artist takes infinite pains with his painting," or "the teacher demonstrated infinite patience with her students," but we are merely using the term "infinite" as a synonym for "great." It is technically improper to speak of anything or anyone as "infinite" except God.

In 1 Kings 8 Solomon offers a prayer of dedication for the temple in Jerusalem, speaking of God's infinity without actually using the term. Verse 27: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" In Jeremiah 23:23 God Himself speaks of the same attribute when He asks, "Am I only a

God nearby, and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him? Do not I fill heaven and earth?"

The relevance of God's infinitude is significant. It means we can confidently turn from the frequent futility and absurdity of human existence with all its limitations to a God who has none. No sin is too great for His forgiveness, no problem too big for His solution, no tragedy too severe for Him to comfort you.

God is eternal. (Psalm 90:2) Eternity is sometimes thought of as infinity related to time. But a more precise definition would be "that perfection of God whereby He is elevated above all temporal limits and all succession of time, enabling Him to comprehend the whole of existence in one indivisible present." Psalm 90 begins, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." When time words appear in Scripture, we must remember they refer to our time, not God's. In fact, Peter tells us that "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years."

I believe our frequent struggle with the question of divine sovereignty versus human responsibility is essentially a time problem. How can I be free to choose something if God has already willed it? An illustration may help. One person may view a parade from the top of the Sears Tower, where the entire procession can be seen at a glance. Someone else sees it from a street corner. While the man on the street sees one float come before another, the person in the Tower sees both at the same time, though he can tell which direction the parade is going and what the order is. God's view of everything is from the Tower because He is eternal. He doesn't have to wait until something happens in time before He knows it for certain.

God is immutable. (Mal. 3:6) That is, He is unchanging and unchangeable. He is perfectly consistent in all relationships with His creation. Mal. 3:6 says, "I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you are not consumed." Think of some of the ways God does not change.

1. God's character does not change. We all know people who have changed—some for better and some for worse—due to age, stress, mental illness, addictions, etc. But God's character does not change. James 1:17 puts it this way: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

2. God's truth does not change. At times we all say things that aren't true. We all have to eat crow once in a while. God never has to eat crow. "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (1 Peter 1:24-25).

3. God's ways do not change. He still blesses His people, He still hates sin, He still seeks true worshipers—just as He always has. Numbers 23:19 says, "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"

4. God's Son does not change. Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

God's immutability gives us peace of heart because it shows us that He will always keep His promises, never change the requirements for salvation, always act in justice toward us. It also gives us confidence in prayer—we never have to wonder if we'll find Him in a receptive mood.

God is self-sufficient. (Acts 17:24-25) This attribute is rarely talked about but very important. It means that God's interest in His creatures arises from His sovereign good pleasure, not from any need in Himself that His creatures can supply. Tozer said, “Were every man to become an atheist, it would not change God in any way. Believing in Him adds nothing to His perfections; to doubt Him takes nothing away.” He did not mean that God is uninvolved with us or doesn't care but simply that His involvement is of His own free determination. Listen to Acts 17:24-25:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

Actually, this attribute of God provides for us a true sense of our value. The God who doesn't need me, has nevertheless stooped to work by and through me. Though He needs no one, He will graciously accept anyone.

The next three attributes, often called “the omni's,” can be discussed together. God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere present.

God is omnipotent (all-powerful). (Matt. 19:26)

God is omniscient (all-knowing). (Heb. 4:13)

God is omnipresent (everywhere present). (Jer. 23:24)

Allow me to read just one passage of hundreds on these attributes—Job 26:7-14:

He spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing. He wraps up the waters in his clouds, yet the clouds do not burst under their weight. He covers the face of the full moon, spreading his clouds over it. He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters for a boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of the heavens quake, aghast at his rebuke. By his power he churned up the sea; by his wisdom he cut Rahab (a constellation) to pieces. By his breath the skies became fair; his hand pierced the gliding serpent (another constellation). And these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?

One of the questions raised by skeptical philosophers is related to God's omnipotence: If He is omnipotent, why is there evil? He must be either omnipotent and malevolent (evil) or impotent and benevolent, but He can't be both omnipotent and benevolent. But to show that the presence of evil is inconsistent with God's omnipotence, one would have to show that a world in which

evil could *not* come into existence would be richer in moral and spiritual values than a world in which moral freedom is exercised and sin is known in the concrete. I, for one, would rather live in a world of choices than in a world of robots, even good robots. I think I would rather be a sinful man redeemed than an angel who needs no redemption.

God is holy. (1 John 1:5) Holiness is that perfection of God whereby He maintains His own moral excellence, abhors sin, and demands purity in His moral creatures. I John 1:5 describes God's holiness:

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

The next two attributes are parallel:

God is transcendent. (Isa. 40:12-26)

God is immanent. (Isa. 40:27-31)

That is, He is incomparably great, having absolute grandeur, majesty, and sovereignty. But He is also incomparably small, being a concerned God, involved with His creatures to the point of knowing the number of hairs on their heads. Listen to how these two aspects of God's character are revealed in Isa. 40:10-11:

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. (That speaks of his transcendence, but then it says), "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. (There is His immanence).

The remainder of the chapter, then, expands upon these two great attributes. Belief in the transcendence of God keeps us in awe of Him; belief in His immanence prevents a healthy respect and fear of God from turning into dread and despair.

By the way, if there is any chapter in the Bible from which you will get the most complete picture of the nature and character of God, it is Isaiah 40. That's why I listed it as the Scripture text for today, though of course the time available this morning allows us to spend very little time in it.

God is good. (Exod. 34:6-7) This particular attribute is often categorized into five constituent parts, all of which are moral qualities which prompt God's people to love Him and give Him thanks. Listen to God describe Himself to Moses: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished." Among the attributes that make up His goodness are:

1. Common grace (Matt. 5:45), which is that perfection of God which prompts Him to deal bountifully and kindly with all His creatures. In Matt. 5:45 we read that "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." If I were God

only bad people would have accidents, only good people would prosper. But fortunately I'm not God; it is His nature to be good to everyone. One theologian put it this way: "God is good to all in some ways and to some in all ways." The latter part of that phrase brings our attention to God's special grace.

2. Special grace (Eph. 2:7-8), which is the unmerited goodness of God in offering salvation to those who have forfeited it through sin and who are by nature under a sentence of condemnation. This kind of grace can be appropriated only by faith, according to Eph. 2:7,8. One of our old Gospel hymns speaks clearly of special grace:

*Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill Thy Law's demands.
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone.
Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

3. Love (1 John 4:8) is another aspect of God's goodness. 1 John 4:8 reads, "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love." Divine love seeks the highest good in the one loved, and is therefore more than kindness. C. S. Lewis made a profound observation when he wrote,

It is for people who we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms; with our friends, our lovers, our children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer than be happy fools. God has often rebuked us and punished us, but He has never regarded us with contempt.

In other words, He has always loved us.

4. Mercy (Luke 6:36) is the goodness of God shown to those who are in misery or distress, irrespective of their desserts. Thus mercy is directed at man's pitiable state while grace is more concerned with his guilty state. We need mercy because we are so needy; we need grace because we are so guilty. Luke 6:36 calls upon us to be merciful "just as your Father is merciful."

5. Patience (2 Peter 3: 9) is what delays the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

God is just (righteous). (Rom. 3:25) This deals with His fairness, which involves both remuneration and retribution. God will reward obedience and He will punish disobedience. He *must*, because it is His very nature to be just.

God is faithful (true). (Lam. 3:22-23) This means He is trustworthy, dependable, honest, real, and genuine. Lam. 3:22,23 is the basis for one of our favorite hymns: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

God is wise. (Job 28) Wisdom refers to the ability to find the best means to achieve one's

ends. God has perfect wisdom, and the means He chooses to teach us and mold us are the wisest means, despite our frequent viewpoint to the contrary. And finally,

God is sovereign. (Eph. 1, Rom. 9) God's sovereignty may be the most important and far-reaching of all His attributes. It tells us He is King. He has undisputed supremacy in this universe. He's in control. Nothing is outside His control. Frankly, I don't see how it could be any other way. Either God is sovereign and all that has ever existed or will exist is within His plan, or God is not sovereign and there are things which exist in the universe over which He has no authority or control. Difficulties arise either way, but the former has far fewer than the latter.

And the Scriptures clearly teach that God is sovereign. The first chapter of Ephesians, the ninth chapter of Romans and scores of other passages address the sovereignty of God. But probably no passage does it better than the prayer of David in 1 Chron. 29:11-12:

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.

I'm reminded of a story told by Donald Grey Barnhouse, long-time pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. When he was a child a friend of the family came to visit, a man who was in the U.S. cavalry. This man said (with a seriousness that belied his humor),

The most important person in the entire armed forces of the United States is a cavalry general. After that there is a cavalry colonel, a cavalry major, a cavalry captain, a cavalry lieutenant, a cavalry sergeant, and a cavalry trooper. And then comes the cavalry trooper's horse . . . followed by nothing, followed by a general in the infantry.

Everyone laughed at the story. But years later, when Barnhouse was reflecting on the importance of the various doctrines of the Christian faith, this illustration returned to him. "What is the most important doctrine?" he asked. He answered that the most important doctrine of all is the sovereignty of God, and it is so important that it may properly be said to be followed by nothing, followed by the doctrines about which the church of Jesus Christ is so often divided—church government, the sacraments, prophecy, and other matters. It's worth thinking about.

There is only one other matter with which we must deal this morning, and that is the question,

How can I know God personally? (John 14:6)

We have studied some twenty of God's attributes, but for some people we may have succeeded only in increasing your knowledge or awareness of who the God of the Bible claims to be. There is a far more important goal I have this morning and every Sunday. And that is to convince you that you can have more than an intellectual relationship with this God. You can be adopted into His eternal family, experience His personal forgiveness, and walk with Him daily.

Jesus Christ is the key to knowing God personally. He is God's transformer. Before electricity can be harnessed for a home or skyscraper it must pass through a transformer. Before that

happens it is too powerful and its form is not useable. In fact, it is downright dangerous. Jesus brought God down to earth for us. In His words and actions, and particularly at the Cross, we can grasp the character and intentions of God. Jesus bridged the troubled waters between sinful man and a holy God by dying in our place, paying our penalty. By placing your faith in Jesus you can become a child of God.