

1. GOD

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

PRAY A PSALM

Where could I go to get away from your spirit?

Where could I go to escape your presence?

If I went up to heaven, you would be there.

If I went down to the grave, you would be there too!

If I could fly on the wings of dawn,

stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean—

even there your hand would guide me;

even there your strong hand would hold me tight!

If I said, “The darkness will definitely hide me;

the light will become night around me,”

*even then the darkness isn't too dark for you!
Nighttime would shine bright as day,
because darkness is the same as light to you!*

—Psalm 139:7-12

GET THE CONVERSATION ROLLING

Roll a six-sided die and answer the corresponding question from the list below.

1. What sight, sound, or smell do you associate with God, and why?
2. Name one actor and one actress you would cast as God in a movie, and briefly explain your choices.
3. If you were God and wanted to prove your existence to the world, what would you do?
4. What's one thing you wished everyone believed about God?
5. What currently popular, nonreligious song most makes you think about God, and why?
6. If you could ask God to do any one thing to prove God's existence, what would you ask for?

CONSIDER THE CREED

Can We Talk About God Without Blushing?

Early in June 2016, a certain piece of “news” flooded my social media feeds. Theoretical physicist Dr. Michio Kaku had supposedly made a stunning announcement. One website breathlessly declared:

World Renowned Scientist Michio Kaku Proves Existence Of God¹

Turns out, he didn't.

As I followed a long trail of hyperlinks away from that clickbait headline, I never found a source I could trust telling me when, where, or to whom Dr. Kaku had made this groundbreaking revelation. But I did find a year-old article by him in which he writes, “We physicists are the only scientists who can say the word ‘God’ and not blush.”²

I also found, on YouTube, an even older interview suggesting what he meant by those words.³ In the interview, Dr. Kaku describes the way Albert Einstein thought about God: “the God of order, harmony, beauty, simplicity and elegance”⁴—the ultimate reason we find structure in the cosmos where there could have been chaos, and loveliness where there could have been ugliness. Since Dr. Kaku is an expert in cosmology (the study of the universe’s origin and development), I suspect this is the kind of God he can talk about without blushing.

When the people who wrote the Bible looked at the heavens and the earth, they too saw structure and beauty:

- “Heaven is declaring God’s glory,” the psalm-singer rejoices; “the sky is proclaiming his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1).
- In Isaiah, God insists that God did not “create [the earth as] a wasteland but formed it as a habitation... I didn’t say... ‘Seek me in chaos’” (45:18, 19).
- The Bible begins, in Genesis 1, with a highly structured poem about the highly structured world God made: a “supremely good” world (verse 31) where waters and land, trees and plants, birds and beasts, man and woman all exist in well-balanced harmony.

Scripture affirms that God *is* a God of order, harmony, elegance. But it also says more about God than scientists, even those who are religious, ever can.

Science cannot prove *or* disprove God’s reality. Science is a powerful tool for observing and analyzing the natural world; it’s indispensable for forming, testing, and refining ideas about how the world works. But no amount of natural structure observed or theorized by scientists leads to the inescapable, ironclad conclusion that an intelligent, intentional Creator exists (or doesn’t), much less the God in whom we Christians believe.

The Apostles’ Creed identifies God as “the Father Almighty.” That phrase is partly about our belief that God is the “creator of heaven and earth” (although notice that the Creed doesn’t give a blow-by-blow account of *how* God created; it simply states God *did*). But it’s even more about our

relationship to our (and everyone and everything else's) Creator. And this relationship means we *should* blush when we talk about God—not from embarrassment, but from love.

What Calling God “Father” Really Means

Christians call God “Father” because Jesus did, and told us to as well.

He taught his disciples, “Pray like this: Our Father who is in heaven . . .” (Matthew 6:9). Jesus wasn't dictating a specific set of words his followers must recite exactly as he spoke them every time they pray; he didn't wake up that morning and say, “Today I'll write ‘The Lord's Prayer.’” He was showing his followers the attitude they should have when talking and listening to God. He was teaching them to talk with God not as a creature talking with the “creator of heaven and earth,” but as a child talking with a parent. He was inviting them to experience the same kind of close, personal, loving relationship with God that he experienced.

Jesus wasn't the first person to talk about God as a father. The exact phrase “Father in heaven” isn't a name for God in the Old Testament, but Hebrew Scripture pictures God as the father of the people of Israel (for example, Deuteronomy 1:31; Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 11:1-4) and, occasionally, as father on a more personal scale: “As a father has compassion for his children,” the psalm-singer assures us, “so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him” (103:13 NRSV).

But by Jesus' time, the name “Father in heaven” had become one way Jewish rabbis identified God—less frequently than names like “King of the universe,” but about a hundred uses of the phrase “Father in heaven” show up in rabbinic writings. “Upon whom can we rely?” asks one of these texts. The answer: “Upon our Father in Heaven.”⁵

As a name for God, “Father in heaven” isn't without potential problems. For some people, it reinforces an unbiblical assumption that God is literally male—the Big Old Man on a king's throne in the sky, usually with a long white beard, often seen in old religious art.

For other people, the name associates God with human fathers in painful ways. Fathers who abuse, abandon, or simply don't pay enough attention to

their kids can make it hard, if not impossible, for those kids to think about God as “the Father Almighty” at any age. How could anyone worship, let alone love, a bigger version of someone who let them down, made them angry, or scared and hurt them so much? How could anyone else tell them they must?

I think Jesus understands those kinds of concerns. I *know* he cares about the people who have them. His church should too. No one should be criticized or made to feel uncomfortable because they don’t want to call God “Father.”

But the church shouldn’t lose “Father” as a name for God either. It connects us to biblical truth, historic tradition, and Jesus’ own prayer life—but it also does something else. It shows us how God defines what the word *Father* means. We don’t call God “Father in heaven” because God happens to remind us of the really great dad we have or wish we had on earth. It’s the other way around: we know a human dad is really great when, and only when, he reminds us of God.

And the same goes for mothers, and brothers and sisters, and husbands and wives, and friends. We don’t judge God by our human relationships, to see how well God measures up. We measure our human relationships by the standard God sets in God’s relationship with us.

The God Who Exists—And Loves

“Father” is the only name in the Apostles’ Creed, but that doesn’t make it the only available or acceptable option. The Bible talks about and pictures God in many ways: as a mother (Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 42:14; 49:15; 66:13), as a winged bird (Deuteronomy 32:11; Psalms 57:1; 91:4; Luke 13:34), as a rock (2 Samuel 23:3; Isaiah 44:8), as a tower (Psalm 61:3; Proverbs 18:10), and more. We need a variety of names and images for God.

And because proper Christian God-talk always begins in our actual experience of God, we can use new names and images if they highlight some quality of God we know is true because Jesus’ life and ministry confirm it.

For example, on Sunday, September 16, 2001—five days after the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania—Jesus’ parables about a shepherd seeking a lost sheep and a woman hunting for a lost

coin (Luke 15:1-10) were the assigned Gospel reading in many churches.⁶ The horrific images of collapsing towers and burning buildings were still smoldering in so many people's eyes and minds...but scenes of brave first responders rushing toward the smoke and debris to look for trapped victims were also on TV and in hearts. That Sunday, I know that more than one preacher chose to talk about Jesus, not as the Good Shepherd, but as the Good Firefighter, the Good Police Officer, the Good Paramedic, who searches tirelessly for the lost in hopes of bringing them home in joy.

The Apostles' Creed doesn't offer any provable evidence of God from nature or any other source. It doesn't present any philosophical arguments for God's existence. And I wonder if that's because, at our core, we human beings aren't really as interested in the question "Does God exist?" as we are in the question "Does God exist *for me*? Does a God exist who cares about me? Does a God exist who can strengthen and support me when times are tough? Does a God exist who loves me as I am? Is there, out there, a God I can trust?"

Jesus' earliest followers met that God in him: the God whose deep, fierce love meant no distance was far enough to keep God from them. If they were to ascend to heaven, God would be there; if they were to descend to the grave, God would be there too (see Psalm 139:7-8). But they didn't have to go up or go down: in Jesus, God moved for and toward them (see Ephesians 4:9-10), entering the world as a humble servant whose service led him "to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). And after they encountered the risen Jesus, his friends came to realize, as the Apostle Paul wrote, that *nothing*, not even death, could ever separate them from God's love in Christ (see Romans 8:38-39).

That's God, the Father Almighty: the God who is and will do and will be whatever it takes to love me, to love you... the heavenly Father who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life" (John 3:16).

So tell me, are you blushing yet?

Some Questions to Think About

- How well do you think science and religion can complement each other? Do you agree that “[s]cience cannot prove *or* disprove God’s reality”? Why?
- How comfortable are you with calling God “Father”? What other names for and images of God do you use in your prayers?
- How close is your relationship with God? How, if at all, has it changed over time?
- What about Jesus most clearly shows you that God exists for you and loves you?

REFLECT WITH SCRIPTURE

Read Exodus 2:23–3:15. As a baby, thanks to his mother’s and sister’s quick thinking, Moses escaped Pharaoh’s plot to kill all the boys born among his Hebrew slaves. Moses was raised by Pharaoh’s own daughter. As an adult, he murdered an Egyptian he saw beating an enslaved Hebrew man, then ran away to save his own life. The story in our Scripture takes place far away and many years later, after Moses has settled into his new life as a shepherd.

- Moses sees a bush that is burning but is not burned up. What does this “amazing sight” (verse 3) suggest about how God is and acts in the world?
- God tells Moses, “I am . . . Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God, and Jacob’s God” (verse 6). How can knowing what God has done in the past help us recognize and believe in God in the present? How can that same knowledge hinder us when we’re seeking God today?
- What does God’s explanation to Moses in verses 7-10 tell us about who God is and what God does?
- In the ancient world, knowledge of a thing or being’s name was believed to give you power over it. What does God’s name (verse 14) tell us about God’s freedom from human control?
- God assures Moses, “I’ll be with you” (verse 12). How can people know God is with them today? How do you know God is with you?

- What does this story show us about what believing in God looks like in practical terms?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

“Psalm 8 File”

Read Psalm 8. The psalm-singer sees God’s wonderful works on earth and in heaven, and is moved that the Creator of all things still cares so much for human beings. Look through old issues of nature and astronomy magazines, or look online, for images that impress you with the beauty of God’s creation. Clip the pictures and save them in a file folder (real or virtual). Use these images this week as aids for meditation and prayer.

An “Oldie-But-a-Goodie”

Find and listen to the song “One of Us” (written by Eric Bazilian, originally sung by Joan Osborne in 1995).

- How do you react to the questions it asks about God?
- Do you think the song takes belief in God seriously? Why or why not?
- Does the song prompt you to rethink how you picture God for yourself? Why or why not?

Faith and Film

In *Bruce Almighty* (2003), God (Morgan Freeman) offers Bruce (Jim Carrey), a local TV personality who’s unhappy with his life, the chance “to do God’s job better.” (Suggested sample: Bruce meets God and discovers how much God knows about him, at 0:26:13–0:32:29.)

- What do you like best about this movie’s depiction of God? What do you like least? Why?
- What about God in this film do you think agrees with how the Bible presents God? What doesn’t?
- Would Jesus recognize God in this movie as his and our “Father in heaven”? Why or why not?

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

A new thought I had about God in this session:

A question I still have about God after this session:

One thing I want others to know I believe about God:
