

The Nicene Creed: 'the only begotten Son of God'

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[0 : 00] Let's pray and ask for God's help. Heavenly Father, I ask that the words of my mouth and the! Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

! Dear friends, who are you listening to this Christmas? Who are you listening to this Christmas? There are all kinds of different voices we listen to at Christmas, aren't there? Christmas really is an experience for the ears. It is for the eyes, all the lights. It is for the stomach as we eat all kinds of food, but it certainly is for the ears, isn't it? Are you someone that listens to the King's speech on Christmas Day? I know some people that set their day by it. Very little happens in the morning. The King speaks at three, then presents and food and everything follows. Or perhaps this month of December, you've been to hear Handel's Messiah, a wonderfully glorious, beautiful piece of music. Perhaps you've heard other choirs sing carols or been to school nativity or something like that. Perhaps this time of year you particularly enjoy hearing the voice of a family member, a friend, someone you don't speak to very much, but this time of year we make that phone call. This time of year is special because I hear their voice.

Friends, all of these things, and indeed much more I hope, are good things to listen to in this time of year. But I want to encourage us this evening to listen to one voice, one voice above all other voices, above all other noises this Christmas, the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 24 of the passage we've just read, the Lord Jesus tells the Jews, the Jewish leaders, the crowds, that they should listen to him and believe in the one who sent him. So what we're going to do this evening from John 5, and then also through the lens of the Nicene Creed is think about, well, why should we listen to Jesus? Why should we believe in the one who sent him and believe in him? But before we do that, I do just want to highlight and underscore for us kind of how high the stakes are. Listening to the king, listening to your favorite Christmas music is all good, but the stakes are not this high.

Why?

Well, what else does Jesus go on to say in verse 24? Listen to him, believe in the one who sent him, and you gain what? Eternal life.

And actually, that is something we all want, isn't it? Come January, what will our society do once again? Reach for ways we can eke out and do just a little bit more from these frail and failing bodies.

[3 : 04] The gym membership numbers go up, the diet start, the weight loss injections, whatever it is, is reached for, right? We want life, not just length of it, but quality of it. Well, Jesus holds out to us eternal life, eternal life, life. Now, for some of us this evening, listening to the voice of the Lord Jesus is new. Perhaps for some of us it's brand new or just very recent, but the stakes really are life and death. Have you listened to Jesus and believed? Dear friends, if you haven't listened to Jesus this evening, believe on him and receive life. The greatest thing you could receive this Christmas is him. But for others this evening, perhaps as we come tonight, the question isn't whether to believe. We have, but if I can put it this way, it's to keep on believing, keep on trusting.

Perhaps 2025 has been one of the hardest years on record. Painful in so many ways. Maybe it's a broken friendship. Maybe it's a broken body, whatever it is. Can we keep trusting the Lord Jesus' words? Do we keep believing? Now, the answer to, should I start listening to Jesus and believing on him or keep listening to Jesus and believing him, is a resounding yes. So why? Why? Why does Jesus say here to listen to him and believe in the one who sent him? Well, just before I give you the answer, when we begin exploring it, let me just say that the Bible gives us lots of other reasons too. We should listen to Jesus because he is the king, the Psalm 2 king. We should listen to Jesus because he is the prophet sent by God. We should listen to Jesus because the Father tells us to listen to him at his baptism.

For those reasons and an abundance more, we should listen to the Lord Jesus. But what is the answer that the Lord Jesus begins to unpack here in John 5? We should listen to him because he has authority as the only begotten Son of God. He has authority as the only begotten Son of God. He is the begotten Son of God. Did you see that? After all this back and forth with the Jewish leaders, after verse 18 and following, what do we have? Jesus talking lots about Father and Son, Father and Son. In other words, Jesus says we should listen to him because of who he is. And what we're going to do this evening is try and show you show you from here and look at the creed and think about what that little phrase means, that Jesus is eternally begotten of the Father, that he is the begotten Son of God.

Now, in order to do this this evening, I think it's going to feel a little bit like, okay, circling a plane in the skies before you come into land. I wonder if that's ever happened to you. You're flying into Heathrow, but you hear that it's quite busy Heathrow, so you kind of need to just circle a couple of times before coming in to land. Maybe the weather's turned, and so you just sort of take a flight path a little bit before landing. Has that ever happened? Well, that's what we're going to do this evening. Looking down, if you like, at the subject matter, looking at the subject matter, we're going to circle it twice. One's from John 5, and the other through the lens of the Creed. And in doing so, try to understand what it means that Jesus is the Son, that he's the eternally begotten Son, that John 5, 26, he has life from the Father. Now, maybe in danger of kind of taking the analogy and stretching it just a little bit too far here. It points. It may feel a little bit, as we begin to unpack some of this, that as we look out of the plane window, it looks like some cloud has come over. Or perhaps it's going to start to feel like we're lacking a little bit of oxygen in the cabin, okay? But that's okay. In other words, I think our minds are going to be stretched. At least certainly mine was, thinking about this for this evening. Friends, we're going to fly, if we can keep stretching the analogy, we're going to look, as we think about what it means that the Son of God is eternally begotten of the Father, we're going to look in a place where even angels can barely look. To think about what it means as God to be God, one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. So it's meant to feel hard. That is okay.

[7 : 33] Okay. So in order to try and get an answer to what it means that Jesus, the Son of God, is begotten of the Father, I want us to start in John 5 for our first kind of loop around this. And I want us to ask, why do these Jewish leaders persecute Jesus in verse 16? Why are they persecuting him? Verse 18, why do they want to kill him? Well, John tells us that Jesus is making himself equal with God.

And so from the viewpoint of these Jewish leaders, Jesus is blaspheming. What has happened with this healing on the Sabbath in John 5 here is blasphemous. Why? Because Jesus is claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath by healing on the Sabbath. He says, my Father is working and I am working too.

He is claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath by healing on that day. Now, these Jewish leaders know that there is only one God. There is only one God. There is only one Lord of the Sabbath. So they're looking here at Jesus' claim and thinking, well, if I can put it this way, how can there be two? How can Jesus, as he goes on to say, the Son and the Father? How can we have a Father and a Son, a Son and a Father, and yet there only be one Lord of the Sabbath? If there was any verse these religious leaders would have had as a kind of screen background on their phones or had penned up on the family planner, the family whiteboard, whatever at home, it was Deuteronomy 6, 4, the Shema.

Ah, hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. They would have learned that before they learned to read as their children were sent off to Sunday school. That was the memory verse. Okay, God is one.

So they're looking at Jesus and thinking, how can you make claims of deity that you are God, the Son of God, the Lord of the Sabbath? How can there be a Father and a Son and yet one God?

[9 : 44] And what Jesus begins to go and tell them here in response to this, and what John shows us right throughout his gospel, and what is the testimony of all scripture, is that yes, there is one God, and yet he is three persons. That our God is triune, one God, three persons. So in response to their persecution and death threats, Jesus begins to teach about his relation between the Father and himself, between the Father and the Son. How it can be that there is one God, yet a distinction between persons.

As Jesus goes on to teach here, he doesn't claim to be the Father. He doesn't say, I'm Father. No, no, he's the Son. So how is there distinction, but yet no division? One God, three persons. Now

here, we're just this evening, going to think about Father and Son. But that's what he goes on to show them, that he is not blaspheming, that he has every authority to do what he's doing in healing on the Sabbath because he's the Son of God, co-eternal, co-equal, co-substantial with the Father. So what Jesus does is lift something of the veil of the life kind of inside the triune God. That's what he goes on to say here. Now in John 17, later on, Jesus does the same as he prays to the Father, and John records one of the most kind of intimate conversations between the Father and the Son. And here, although not a prayer, Jesus is taking us kind of right in to the heart of the life inside God, especially in verse 26, which we're going to come to, to show us what God is like and to show us why we can worship him as we worship the Father, one God and three persons. So let's see how Jesus shows them the unity between Father and Son, the oneness, but also then how he shows distinction, but not division. And that's really important. Yes, distinction. The Son is not the Father. The Father is not the Son, but there are not two gods. There is one. All right, so where's the unity? Where's the oneness? Just scan your eyes down. Verse 17. Verse 19. Whatever the Father is doing, the Son is doing. Verse 21. The Son gives life, so the Father gives life.

[12:21] Do you see that there? What the Father does, the Son does, the Son gives life, the Father gives life. There's that unity. After Jesus left the manger and returned, went to Egypt and returned from Egypt, he very likely would have apprenticed with his earthly father. Joseph, the carpenter, Jesus by his side, watching, copying all that he did. What Joseph did, Jesus did. And something akin to that, although still different, Jesus is saying with his heavenly Father there, verse 17, verse 19, verse 21, it's like that, but of an infinitely greater register. It doesn't mean the Son had to learn from the Father, but it speaks of his communion with him. What the Father does, the Son does. How else do we see this unity then?

Verse 20. The Father loves the Son and shows him all he's doing. We see it in the Father's love for the Son. Now, we're going to come back to that in a minute. The fact that the Father loves the Son is very, very good news. And we're going to come back to think about that in a minute, but we see it there.

Verse 23. See the unity again. The Son is due honor as the Father is due honor. We are to worship the Son and the Father. Only God gets worship, so Jesus is making a huge claim of divinity to be God here.

Honor the Son as you honor the Father. So, just as an aside this evening, if you're here this evening and you think, I want something to do with God but not Jesus, verse 23 says you can't. Or perhaps more likely, you want something to do with Jesus, but I'm less sure about the Father. You cannot have that either. We worship the Son as we worship the Father. So, there is one God. Yet, notice how Jesus goes on to speak about a distinction of persons. There is outward distinction by action, namely judgment. Verse 22.

The Father doesn't judge. The Son judges. As we think about God through Scripture and the outward actions of God, we can also think about that in the sent and sendingness. God the Father sends the Son.

[14:52] The Son never sends the Father. The Father sends the Son. The Son is sent by the Father. The Spirit is sent by both. So, to understand God, we can look at his outward action. And here, especially, it is with judgment.

And yet, Jesus tells us that we can understand the distinction not just by outside action but inside the Godhead by the fact the Son is from the Father or of the Father. And this is where, if you think the oxygen is going out of the plane, it's going to start going out even more. Okay? There with. Verse 26.

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. Now, remember, this is in response to the healing. Jesus is wanting to show these Jewish leaders, yes, worship me as the Son. So, verse 26, he says, the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. So, what does it mean that the Father has life in himself? It means the Father is self-existent.

He depends on no one. You see, I, all of us here this evening, we gained life outside of ourselves. We needed mum and dad, parents. We gain life outside of ourselves because we need food to eat. We need air to breathe. If those things stop. We die. But not God. He is dependent on no one for life. He has life in himself. And Jesus says here that the Father has granted the Son life in himself. In other words, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. Now, this life granted from Father to the Son must be eternal, must be eternally. Why? Because if the Son was created by the Father, which

is the issue at Nicaea that we're going to come to speak about in a little moment, if the Son was created by the Father, even as a kind of deity, then he would be dependent on the Father for life. He would not have life in himself. But the Father has granted that to the Son, meaning the Son of God who came to take on human flesh in Jesus, the one standing before these leaders, is from eternity. The Son of God is from eternity. He must be. So what Jesus is telling them from verse 26, it is starting to give us some language of how we can understand and talk about one God in three persons. Verse 26, the Father has life in himself. And another way theologians talk about that is he is unbegotten. The Father doesn't grant life to the Son. No, the Son has, the Father, the Son doesn't grant life to the Father rather, sorry, the Father grants life to the Son. He's given life to the Son. So the Father has life in himself. He is unbegotten. The Son has life granted or given from the Father. He is begotten. And as we confessed earlier about the Spirit, he proceeds from Father and Son. So let me ask this one more way, and then we'll try and bring the plane down just a little bit so there's a little bit more oxygen and think, what are we doing with all this? Let me just say this one other way. When we talk about God, why is the Father the Father? Why is the Son the Son?

[18 : 38] Well, the Father is the Father in the triune Godhead because he has a Son. The Son is the Son because he has a Father. The Spirit is the Spirit because he proceeds from Father and Son. One God in three persons, distinction without division. Trinity and unity, unity in Trinity. Now, maybe we're looking out the plane window and thinking, I really cannot see the ground light now. It's very misty out there.

The oxygen is gone. We should be putting on the oxygen mask to get some life about us. What is all this doing? Well, hopefully we'll see some of this again as we circle around a second time and look through the lens of the Nicene Creed. But let me just suggest three things.

One, in Jesus' response, and as he's telling these Jews how it is there can be one God in three persons, why he's to be worshipped, why he's to be honoured, why he is the Lord of the Sabbath. If we feel stretched and it's hard to understand it, we should feel that. God is God. We are creatures. He is like an ocean without a shore, without a beach line. We should feel like we are swimming in deep waters and never reaching the edge. If you feel, wow, thinking about God, our triune God, is mind-bending, you are in good company. I was telling some of the, Joe and Donald, some of the others this week, that I was reading one theologian this week, one church father, Gregory of Nazianzus, and he said, when we speak about the begottenness of the Son from eternity, we should just kind of fall silent because it's a mystery. Maybe some of you are wishing I would do that now, right? These are the deep things of God. How do we have three in one, one in three? Second, the fact that the Son is granted life, his begotten, is good news. The fact he's begotten eternally is good news in many ways and returning to it regarding the love of God. What does Jesus say? The Father loves the Son.

You see, if the Father created the Son, then his love would have had to have a start, a beginning. We could not say God is love. But the fact that he's granted the Son life in himself tells us that God is love. You see, if God's love had a beginning, it could have an end. If he created it to set it on something, then it could be removed. But no, God's eternal loving communion with the Son tells us that God is love and can be no other. Friends, this cannot be said of the God of Islam, cannot be said of the God of Hinduism or any other religion. No, one God in three persons eternally communing in love.

[21 : 41] And even just as an aside, think about what it means for us. In Christ, through the Son, adopted by him in union with him, we now commune with the one with whom the Son communes, loving communion with the Father. Right, before we move on to the creed and circle around this doctrine a little bit and try and put eyes on it again, let me just say one other thing. This should make us stand back in awe and wonder at the Lord Jesus, at the baby that lay in the manger, at Jesus as he speaks to these Jewish leaders. Think about it, the one to whom the Father has given life in himself.

This one person, Jesus, the self-existent, he came and needed milk from his mum. The one who has abundant life in himself, Herod tries to kill. The one who is outside time from eternity enters time in a womb.

The one who is equal with God does not grasp at it, but rather grasps a hand around a finger of his virgin mother as he lay in her lap. The one who is begotten of the Father is born of a woman. Glorious mystery. Now, I want us to circle this doctrine again of Christ's begottenness from the

angle of the creed. So, let me read then the words. I think they're going to come up here just to see what we confessed earlier. We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten or the eternally begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Now, two weeks ago, Donald introduced the creeds and some of the issues going on when the council met in 325 to write it. And often, if we want to know what the issues are, you just need to see where most of the ink is spilled, where the airtime is. There's not a long section on the Father. There's not a long section on the Spirit. There's lots on the Son. So, that is where the issues are. And these are not small issues. Now, this evening, we might be scratching our heads at all this, but remember, Jesus Christ is the center of our faith. At the center of our faith is a person. He is the treasure of all the world. He's the one who the Father loves from eternity. We should want to know him right.

If I told you this evening that my wife was six foot with blonde hair and spoke with an Irish accent, for those of you who know me, would say, Ben, I don't think you know your wife, very well. But that is not what Sarah's like. It would reflect terribly on me, right? As if I didn't know her. Well, how much more with Jesus, our Savior, that we should want to know him and know him to the glory of the Father. And that's why these issues at Nicaea are so important. And as we'll think about next week, so important for our salvation, which is why he came and are still so important today.

[25 : 00] We want to know Jesus, our Savior, more and more. So very, very briefly, we'll move through this a little quicker. Just a quick recap. What was the issue? Remember Arius, a local church pastor, 1,700 years ago, was teaching that the Son was at some point created, that there was a time when the Son was not. He put it to a hymn, said it to music, and the teaching spread. So a local church council, or a church council, a wider church council, was called in 325 to set forth what the Bible taught.

And at this council, Athanasius was kind of man of the match. He was the MVP. He hit the home run, whatever other sporting analogy you want. He won the Oscar. I'm not sure. He just, he was the man, right? He came out to try and clear this all up. And he clearly and sharply set out what John 5 taught, what John 1 taught, what we read at the start there, that the Word was with God, that the Word was God.

What Psalm 2 tells us, that the begotten son of the king is set on Zion's hill. What Micah 5 taught, that one from ancient days would come from Bethlehem. You see, what was most important to the fathers was teaching what the Bible taught. They're not coming up with something new. They're just trying to bring clarity, crispness to how God has revealed himself to be, that the son was eternally of the father, eternally of the father. Now, they set it out in four statements. We'll move through quickly. Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, begotten of the father before all worlds, God of gods. Let's just walk through these really quickly. God of gods. Or we could say God from God.

God. Here, the creed affirms that the son is not some part of God. The generation of the son does not imply division in the Godhead or multiple deities. It's not that somehow that God got kind of ripped in half. Okay, here's the father. We need a son. Let's rip it in half. Here's a son. No, right? The father is God. The son is God. God from God. Light of light. Sounds really similar, doesn't it? Similar to before. But it's teaching really that the son is not anything about a lesser light to the father, that Jesus truly is equal with God, equal with the father. One illustration is this.

It's not that God is a kind of 100 watt light bulb and somehow the son is a kind of 99 watt light bulb. No, light of light, light from light. In other words, equal, equally worthy of praise and glory and worship.

[27 : 35] The creed goes on. Very God of very God. Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the father. And here, one commentator says the creed is kind of turning the screw on Arius. Because Arius would have said that the son was God, but just a different kind of God. The word very here, think truly, truly God of truly God. Arius can't say that. Jehovah's witnesses today cannot say that about Jesus. Because the son, if he's created, he cannot be truly God of truly God. And here the creed then confesses what we believe. The son is truly God of truly God. And again, the heat is turned up even more with the use of this word substance. One substance with the father. Now, this needs way more time than we can give. Come and talk to me about it at the end if you want. But again, it's giving an affirmation that the son is of or from God. He's the very Godness of

God. One substance, one essence with the father. He cannot be a creature because a creature or creation would mean not eternal, would be of a different substance. So no, one substance with the father. Now, as a parenthesis before we land this plane, the plane will come into land. Confessing Jesus as one substance with the father is guarding against two heresies. One is tritheism. We do not worship multiple gods.

Here's the play-doh of God stuff, and we take one bit off the play-doh. Here's the father, here's the son, and here's the third bit of the play-doh of the God stuff. Here's the spirit, right? No, no. It's guarding against that. He's of the same substance, the same essence.

But it also guards against another heresy, modalism, which basically says that God kind of puts on different masks or different outfits depending what he's needing to be. I need to be the father right now. I put that on. Oh, I'm needed as the son over here. I take that mask off, put on the sun mask, and off I go. No, that's not how it is either. It is one God in three persons, three persons.

And to confess that God is one substance with the father is guarding against that as well. All right, one point of implication when we land the plane. I want us just to see very briefly how Arius' false doctrine changes the gospel, changes our understanding of God, changes salvation.

For Arius, as we've said, Jesus at some point was created. Yes, a God, but implied a lesser God than the father. Now, if Jesus is at some point created, not eternal, it means that God himself isn't coming to save us. It puts God way more off at a distance. Yes, there's rescue, but it's not from the eternal God.

[30 : 35] It changes the story of redemption. Aslan sending reapercheap, or whichever narnia it is, to die on the stone table as he watches on from a distance. It's not the same. If Jesus is created, we end up with a different kind of God. If the son of God is made, we have a very different story of redemption. Just ask the Jehovah's Witnesses. So, no, we gladly confess with the Nicene Creed, with the church around the world that Jesus is God of God, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made of one substance with the father. So, let's land the plane. Should we listen to Jesus? Should we believe in the one who sent him? Should we worship the God-man Jesus Christ as we worship the father? Yes, because the one man Jesus Christ in his divinity is God of God, light of light, very God of very God. The baby in the manger is the eternal God himself. Jesus healing on the Sabbath is the eternal God himself. Jesus hanging on the cross is the eternal God himself. Jesus bursting out of the tomb and defeating death is the eternal

God himself. Jesus returning on the clouds, as we were hearing about so wonderfully this morning, is the eternal God himself coming? Therefore, dear friends, listen to him, believe in him, and live. He alone, our one God, father, son, and spirit, is worthy of our worship. He alone is worthy of our praise. He alone is the one who can grant eternal life. God himself has visited us in his son, not off as a distance, but the son eternally from the father has come. So, dear friends, this time of year, this Christmas, don't leave the baby in the manger. Don't let the Lord Jesus be all about the warm, fuzzy, no, God has drawn near to us in his son. Listen to him, believe in him, and worship him. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we do not want to leave here this morning with stretched or fuzzy minds. We want to leave here this evening with hearts drawn to you. So, may you do that kindly by your spirit, through your word.

Our minds feel stretched, but it is our hearts that we want to have ultimately stretched to worshipping you. For you, Lord Jesus, our eternally begotten of the father, come into this world to take on flesh, to save us and redeem us. So, we praise you truly this evening as you alone are worthy of our praise.

[33 : 26] God bless you. Go with us, we pray, and may our minds and hearts always be lifted to worship and praise you, our great God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.