

Discussion Starter

What is the most life-changing answer to prayer that you have ever received?

Worship Together

This is a meditation based upon the *Apostles Creed*, which is one of the earliest Christian statements of faith. Read the lines in italics all together and then have one person read the brief thought which follows each statement from the creed.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty

God and Father; the voice of One who, to this day, calls stars into being, tenderly calls me 'son'.

Creator of heaven and earth

All I can see, hear, touch, smell, is His idea. Vastness and detail, physical and emotional, all began in His mind. And the Maker of me — with all my faults, gifts, failings — still looks and says it's "very good".

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord

No other plan, no other Son in case it all went horribly wrong. When God dreamed up the plan of salvation, He put everything He had into it. For a brief time heaven was bereft of its full glory, as the beloved Son gave up everything to become the champion of sinners.

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit

Miraculous... almost unbelievable — God becomes a seed, a fertilized egg in the womb of a teenage girl. Immanuel — God with us, one of us.

Born of the Virgin Mary

Surely God should come with a blinding light, a blast of trumpets? Instead, a couple of private angelic visitations, a dream or two, a solitary star ignored by almost everybody. The veil momentarily lifted for a handful of shepherds. And somewhere, in a backwater town of a backwater country, a baby's cry from an animal shelter, signalling the safe arrival of the Saviour of the world.

Suffered under Pontius Pilate

No safe, comfortable birth. Now a shockingly slow, agonizing road to death. A self-important official, deciding just another man's fate. Shall I, or shan't I? Sensing something not right, but opting out when the pressure was on. Have him beaten, have him disposed of. Yet this decision was destined from the moment the earth was made, prophesied in detail hundreds of years before. By those wounds I am healed.

Was crucified, died and was buried

No reprieve, no heavenly intervention. Only a dark sky. His life ebbed away, and His followers, His friends, His mother, were left with a corpse. Day turned to night, and nothing had changed. It really was all over — finished.

On the third day he rose again from the dead

Sorrow turns to incredulity, then to joy, then to awe. This man, the one we ate with, walked with, talked with, lived with — He really is the glorious Son of the living God! Powerful, glorious, wonderful — even the final enemy, death itself, could not keep Him from us!

He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father

Totally victorious! Heaven is even more glorious than before, now it has a Man who has won through, dealt with the sin that kept us lost, separated and cold towards God, and opened the way for me to be restored to Him.

And he will come to judge the living and the dead

For God to offer himself up in this way, the stakes must be high. Pilate's choice is echoed in the heart of every person who has ever lived. Shall I, or shan't I? Salvation or judgement? And because I acknowledge that my righteousness is as filthy rags before the Righteous One, I choose His righteousness as my own.

I believe in the Holy Spirit

I'm not left alone. I have the Spirit of Jesus, the mind of Christ, the Counsellor — He's all I need for holy living, and He's the down payment on what's to come. Can't wait!

The holy catholic (universal) church

Many churches, one body. Many leaders, one Shepherd. Many nations, races, languages, dialects — all united, equal and holy in Him.

The communion of saints

The most difficult, dull, stupid Christian I can think of is my brother or sister. How dare I reject what God has accepted! How dare I judge what God has embraced! We're not joined by church affiliation, affection, similar interests, or need — we're joined by Christ.

The forgiveness of sins

The worst thing I've ever done — the nasty comment, the violence, the murderous thought — I repent of, and it's forgiven and forgotten. Yes, really! If I sin today, He has a right to be surprised; as far as He's concerned, it's the first one I've ever committed.

The resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

I quite like this body, but it lets me down. Not just weak knees and toothache, but, like an inquisitive bloodhound, it pulls me into blind alleys and tricky terrain if I don't pull on the lead and show it who's boss. But one day, I'll have a body that will match my spirit, and that will be total freedom. And I'll have it for ever.

Bible Study

Read James 5:7-20 and discuss the following questions...

- Why do you think that James considers it so important that Christians don't swear by things, but that their "Yes" is simply yes and their "No" simply no?
- Are you in the habit of praying for those who are sick within your small group? What sort of place do you think that this kind of prayer should have in the life of the group? When would you call in the Elders (v.14) and when would you pray for each other (v.16)?
- Do you think the church has taken sufficiently seriously the command to confess our sins to each other? How, practically, might this work in a church like ours?
- James draws a very close link between confession, forgiveness and healing. Do these three enjoy such a close relationship in your own thinking? How should this influence the way we go about praying for someone who is sick? Please don't fall into the simplistic (and plain wrong) assumption that if someone is sick or disabled it means they are a worse sinner than anyone else – read John 9:1-3
- Think together about the kind of relationship between Christians described in the last two verses, where each one would consider themselves partly responsible for the holiness and Christian walk of their brothers and sisters. To what extent would this kind of watching over each other be desirable within, say, your own small group? Are Christians today open to being corrected by one another? How might this work in practice?

Pray Together

Are you in trouble? Are you happy? Are you sick? Taking verses thirteen to sixteen as your guide, spend some time praying for each person in the group.

Meditations

A few things to consider before your group discussion.

Read James 5:8

Do you think about the return of Jesus as being near? Are there situations in your life at the moment where it would be easier to be patient or to stand firm if you knew that His coming was imminent? Take these situations to God in prayer and ask Him for His perspective on them.

Read James 5:9

James returns to one of his favourite topics, and one that we have thought about quite a bit over the course of these studies – how we speak about each other. Who are you most tempted to grumble against at the moment? Do you think that the way you speak about others has changed at all as a result of studying the book of James? Do you think it should?

Read James 5:12 and Matthew 5:33-37

Can you always be taken at your word? Does your "Yes" remain yes and your "No" remain no, come what may? If you make a commitment can you be relied upon to honour it no matter what? Ask God to

speaking to you about any areas in which you are less than reliable.

Read James 5:13

Which do you find more natural, praying when you are in trouble or expressing your praise when you are happy? Which are you more inclined to do today? Take a few minutes to do so.

Read James 5:16

When was the last time you confessed your sins to someone else? How do you feel about the suggestion that you sometimes ought to do so? Do you have Christian friends that you would feel able to do this with? How about your small group? Talk through your feelings with your heavenly Father.

Read James 5:17-18 and 1 Kings 17 and 18

"Elijah was a man just like us." Not a super-human, just a normal human with an amazing God – just like us. Meditate on that thought for a while.