

## The Mighty God, Isaiah 9. 6, Bethesda, 16 December 2020.

I suspect that, like Linda and me, in spite of the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 this year, you are already deluged with Christmas cards.

I remember one Christmas card in particular which caught my attention several years ago. It came from Linda's now deceased Auntie Phyllis ... who sent the card when she was a mere 96 years old.

What struck me wasn't the picture on the front – nice though it was – nor the greeting inside. It was the Bible text which was quoted ... or, should I say, which was misquoted.

The words quoted came from a verse of scripture often referred to at Christmas time – from Isaiah chapter 9 verse 6. As you can see, the card quoted the prophecy concerning our Lord Jesus Christ as saying, 'His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace'. Leaving aside any other matters, the key thing which struck me was not what this text said, but what it did *not* say.

For whoever had printed the card had omitted one important phrase from the Bible verse ... one *very* important phrase ... namely, 'the Mighty God'.

And it is just that phrase – that title of our Lord Jesus – that I want to consider with you this Wednesday evening. In full, our text reads:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.<sup>1</sup>

As I hope you know, the Lord Jesus is spoken of in scripture as 'our great God'<sup>2</sup> – One who is infinitely 'greater' than Artemis (or, to give her her Roman name, Diana), the supposed 'great' goddess of the Ephesians.<sup>3</sup>

But our Lord Jesus is spoken of not only as the 'great God' ... for, as we saw several weeks ago, the apostle John more or less concluded his first epistle by assuring us that our Lord Jesus is also 'the true God'. 'We are in Him who is true', John wrote, 'even in His Son Jesus Christ. *He is the true God*'.<sup>4</sup>

But not only is He the 'great God' and 'the true God'. He is the supreme God ... and I have in mind Paul's statement concerning Israel in Romans 9: 'from whom, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is *God over all*'.<sup>5</sup>

But our Saviour is not only the 'great God' 'the true God', and the supreme God. Every true believer can claim with Thomas of old that He is 'my God'.<sup>6</sup>

But, according to our text from Isaiah, our Lord is not only the great God ... not only the true God ... not only the supreme God ... not only, by grace, my God ... but He is 'the mighty God'.

And we need to be clear what it is that this title expresses and means. And, as always, we must understand at least something of the context.<sup>7</sup>

At the time of which Isaiah was writing, the northern kingdom of Israel and its own northern neighbour, Syria, felt threatened by the rising power of Assyria, around the Fertile Crescent.

Seeing the need for a strong alliance against Assyria, Rezin, the King of Syria, and Pekah, the king of Israel, had asked Ahaz, the godless and idolatrous king of Judah,<sup>8</sup> to join them.

When Ahaz refused – preferring to enter into a treaty with Assyria, they decided to attack him and his people – of whom Isaiah was one – besieging Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> Their intention was to remove Ahaz and to install a vassal king – a puppet king – of their own on the throne there.

Threatened by this confederacy, Ahaz panicked, and – instead of putting his trust in God to deliver him and his people from the alliance to the north – he chose to appeal to the King of Assyria (by name Tiglath-Pileser III) for his help – offering, of course, to pay him well for his services.<sup>10</sup> Needless to say, neither the Lord nor his prophet (Isaiah) were amused by this faithless and godless policy.

On God's instructions, Isaiah had taken with him one of his sons (by name, 'Shear-jashub', meaning 'a remnant shall return') and confronted Ahaz with God's message, which was that Ahaz was not to fear the two kings to the north – described disparagingly as 'the two ends ('stumps') of smouldering firebrands ('pokers') – continuing for now to smoke, but with no flame which could harm Ahaz or Judah.

For within a short time they would both be destroyed – by Assyria, it transpired. All Ahaz needed to do was to trust firmly in God and to let Him work the thing out. If he would but do this, the Lord Himself would deliver Judah from any attack, whether from the confederacy, or indeed from Assyria in later days.

But Ahaz was having none of it. He had already decided to put his confidence in a covenant with Assyria, and so, when God graciously offered to give him any sign he cared to name, under the mask of pretended reverence for God, he refused to ask for one.

The Lord then, through Isaiah, made it clear to Ahaz that, by calling upon the Assyrians for help, he would be letting himself in for more than he bargained for ... because when, at his invitation, the Assyrians came – and come they would – they would not only conquer both Syria and Israel, but would subsequently invade further south, totally devastating his land – the kingdom of Judah. The full story is told in chapters 7 and 8.

But then, when we come to the early verses of chapter 9, the Lord revealed details of two separate periods of blessing in the (then) future. As some of us saw back briefly in early January BC (before COVID-19),<sup>11</sup> the first had to do with the region of Galilee – where the two tribal areas of Naphtali and Zebulun<sup>12</sup> (situated as they were at the northern end of Palestine) would be *the first region to suffer the destructive power of Assyria*.

But, when the Messiah came – at His first advent – ‘Galilee of the nations’ (as it is described) would be *the first region to benefit from the ‘light’* which would then shine on those ‘walking in darkness’ – a point picked up for us by Matthew in chapter 4.<sup>13</sup>

But then the Lord projects Isaiah on to another day ... to a still future day, if I understand it correctly, in the end times, ... when He (the Lord) will intervene to defeat and to destroy all His foes and to usher in a kingdom of peace and righteousness which will have no end – when all military kit and uniform will be destroyed,<sup>14</sup> when the nations shall not ‘learn war anymore’.<sup>15</sup> And what a great day that will be!

But who, pray, can possibly achieve this? Who possesses the strength and military ability to bring an end to all human conflict?

Only, Isaiah makes clear, the One who bears – the One who fully merits – the name, the ‘Mighty God’ – where the word translated ‘mighty’ stems largely from a military background, normally being rendered in the Old Testament as ‘champion’, ‘warrior’, ‘mighty man’ or the like.<sup>16</sup>

But *this* is no human warrior or superhero! This mighty one is none less than God!<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, if we turn over the page of our Bible to the next chapter, we read, ‘in that day ... such as are escaped of the house of Jacob shall no more again rely upon him that smote them (upon Assyria, that is); but they shall rely upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel ... The remnant shall return (which is, as we noted earlier, the meaning of the name of the prophet’s son, Shear-jashub), the remnant of Jacob (shall return), to the mighty God’.<sup>18</sup>

Well, you can hardly miss it, that ‘the mighty God’ is one and the same as ‘the Lord, the Holy One of Israel!’<sup>19</sup>

Make no mistake. In our text Isaiah provides unmistakable evidence for the unique and divine status of our Lord Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

But, as we all know well, ‘Mighty God’<sup>21</sup> represents just one component of the fourfold ‘name’ by which the coming King is to be known – in full, ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’<sup>22</sup> ... not that the Holy Spirit is saying that our Lord would actually be called this by the men of His day ... any more than He would actually be called ‘Immanuel’.<sup>23</sup> The point is rather that He is worthy to bear every one of these titles, as accurately describing His nature and His character.

I *know* what Shakespeare was driving at when he put into the mouth of Juliet the now famous words, ‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’.<sup>24</sup> And no doubt a *rose* would – and no doubt to Juliet *her* surname of Capulet and *Romeo’s* surname of Montague were no more than conventional labels.

But I can tell you that the Holy Spirit does not deal in conventional labels ... and He has poured tremendous meaning and value into this King’s fourfold name – each component of which, in all likelihood, stands in deliberate contrast to the known character of King Ahaz – a man who was foolish ... a man who was weak, devoid of any heroic or warrior-like qualities ... a ruler who oppressed the poor and disadvantaged ... and whose chosen policy would lead his nation to bloodshed and ruin.

But, by way of contrast, *this* King – our Lord Jesus – is marked by ‘wonderful counsel’, transcending the most profound human wisdom ... is marked by heroic power and military prowess to match His profound counsel and

strategy – for, if, as the ‘Wonderful Counsellor’, He *makes His plans*, as the ‘Mighty God’, He *makes His plans work* ... and not that only, but He is marked by a father-like watchful care – unchanging *and unending* – over His people ... and, finally, He is marked by a government and rule characterised by righteousness and peace.

As Counsellor, He is wonderful. As God, He is mighty. As a father, He is always and ever – indeed to all eternity – an affectionate carer and provider for His people. And as the coming Prince, He will introduce a kingdom of peace and prosperity.

But we cannot leave our text without noting another contrast ... not between our Lord and Ahaz, nor indeed between our Lord and anyone else. But rather a contrast which lies *within the text itself*.

For who, we must ask, is this who bears the name ‘Mighty God’. Just look at the opening words – ‘To us a child is born’ ... and, in fact, both the Hebrew text and the Greek Old Testament place the emphasis on the word ‘child’.<sup>25</sup>

What marvels and mysteries lie here! The mighty God is a child born.<sup>26</sup>

When I ponder those words, ‘A child is *born*’, my mind races to that moment, over 700 hundred years after Isaiah wrote them, when Pilate posed the question, ‘You are not really a king, are you?’ to which our Lord answered, ‘...For this purpose *I was born* ...’.<sup>27</sup>

What a thought! That the ‘Mighty God’ should ever be able to say ‘I was born’. Which takes us, of course, to the very heart of that which we call ‘the incarnation’ – that our Lord Jesus Christ is ‘perfect in Godhead and ... perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man’.<sup>28</sup>

Oh the wonder of it all, that the One who had ever stood on level ground with the Father, came forth from the Father, to stand on level ground with us.

Consider, then, The ‘Mighty God’ who became the ‘child born’!

‘The Lord of hosts’ who became ‘a man of sorrows’.<sup>29</sup>

The Word who ‘was’ God, who ‘became’ flesh and who dwelt among us – or, as one modern paraphrase renders it, who ‘moved into our neighbourhood’.<sup>30</sup>

We thought at the outset of the Lord Jesus as ‘our great God’, as the One who is infinitely ‘greater’ than Artemis the supposed ‘great’ goddess of the Ephesians. It was the town clerk of Ephesus who is on record as having spoken of the image of the Greek goddess Artemis which supposedly ‘fell down’ from heaven.<sup>31</sup> But He who is the Mighty God didn’t ‘fall down’ from heaven; as He said, He ‘came down from heaven’.<sup>32</sup> Truly, He came ‘out of the blue’! What a breath-taking – what a stupendous – stoop that was.

Consider again The ‘Mighty God’ who became the ‘child born’!

The One existing in the form of *God* who was found in fashion as a *man*.<sup>33</sup> Showing, by so doing, that He thought less of Himself and His heavenly glory than He did of me. Let me say that again, that He thought less of Himself and His heavenly glory than He did of *me!*

Consider again The ‘Mighty God’ who became the ‘child born’!

The One who made the heavens,<sup>34</sup> was ‘made like His brethren’.<sup>35</sup>

The One who made the angels<sup>36</sup> was Himself made lower than the angels.<sup>37</sup>

And why so? For the simple reason that He did not take hold of angels, with a view to helping *them* – but rather He took hold of those who, by faith, are the spiritual descendants of Abraham.<sup>38</sup>

And that is why there is such a marked and obvious difference between the announcement made by the angel of the Lord to the shepherds in the field near Bethlehem those many years later, and the words of the prophet in our text. ‘To you’, the angel declared, ‘is born this day in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord’. ‘To us’, the prophet declared, ‘a child is born’.

The angel occupied the role only of an interested spectator. The prophet – on our behalf – occupied the role of a grateful recipient and beneficiary.

What is more, the One born ‘a child’, and born ‘a Saviour’, was born ‘King’.

Consider once more The 'Mighty God' who became the 'child born'!

I am reminded of the words of Thomas Watson, the Puritan, 'That man should be made in God's image is a wonder, but that God should be made in man's image is a greater wonder ... that the Ancient of Days should be born ... that He who thunders in the heavens should cry in the cradle'.<sup>39</sup>

Without a doubt, it is a great wonder indeed 'that the Ancient of Days should be born' ... that the 'Mighty God' should ever become *the* 'child born'!

Thank God, that He who is 'the Mighty God' didn't use 'zoom' when He revealed Himself to men, out of fear of contacting defilement from our world-wide 'sin' virus. No, indeed. He came in person, as 'a child born', that He might deal with that 'sin' virus once for all.<sup>40</sup>

You may remember that John the Baptist once predicted that One would come after him of One 'mightier' than he. As John later declared, the One who was 'mightier' than he had come as 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'<sup>41</sup>

The day after tomorrow marks the anniversary of the birthdate of Mr Charles Wesley. And I gladly leave it for the great Methodist leader and hymn-writer to conclude my message for me in a most seasonal way.

Christ, by highest Heav'n adored;  
Christ the everlasting Lord;  
Late in time, behold Him come,  
Offspring of a virgin's womb.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
Hail the incarnate Deity,  
Pleased as man with man to dwell,  
Jesus *our* Immanuel.<sup>42</sup>

Thank you, Mr Wesley.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Isa. 9. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Tit. 2. 13.

<sup>3</sup> For about two hours they all with one voice cried out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? ... you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess', Acts 19. 34-37.

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 5. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Rom. 9. 5 ESV.

<sup>6</sup> For we read in that well known section at the close of John 20 that, when the Lord invited Thomas to reach out his finger and hand to satisfy himself by putting them into His (the Lord's) hands and side respectively, 'Thomas answered Him, "My Lord and my God!"... John 20. 28.

<sup>7</sup> To search for [Scripture's] contemporary message without first wrestling with its original meaning is to attempt a forbidden short cut. It dishonours God (disregarding his chosen way of revealing himself in particular historical and cultural contexts), it misuses his Word (treating it like an almanac or book of magic spells) and it misleads his people (confusing them about how to interpret Scripture) — John Stott, '*Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today*', page 221.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Kings 16. 2-4.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Kings 16. 5; cf. 2 Kings 15. 37.

<sup>10</sup> 'Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, saying, I am your servant and your son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, who have risen up against me. And Ahaz took the silver and the gold that was found in the house of Jehovah, and in the treasures of the king's house, and sent it as a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria hearkened to him; and the king of Assyria went up against Damascus, and took it, and carried it captive to Kir, and put Rezin to death', 2 Kings 16. 7-9.

<sup>11</sup> 8 January 2020: '*Christ in Isaiah*'.

<sup>12</sup> Naphtali (in upper Galilee) and Zebulun (in lower Galilee).

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 4. 12-17.

<sup>14</sup> Isa. 9. 4-7. See , 'every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire', v. 5.

<sup>15</sup> 'In that day ... He shall judge among the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore', Isa. 2. 2-4.

<sup>16</sup> Behold, the Lord, the LORD of hosts, Takes away from Jerusalem and from Judah The stock and the store, The whole supply of bread and the whole supply of water; the mighty man and the man of war', Isa. 3. 1. 'the remainder of the number of archers, the mighty men of the people of Kedar, will be diminished', Isa. 21. 17. 'Thus says the Lord: "Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away', Isa. 49. 25. 'Like arrows in the hand of a warrior', Psa. 127. 4. 'When David heard of it, he sent Joab and all the army of the mighty men', 1 Chron. 19. 8. 'These are the names of the mighty men whom David had', 2 Sam. 23. 8. 'David ran and stood over the Philistine, took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him, and cut off his head with it. And when the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled', 1 Sam. 17. 51.

<sup>17</sup> And, in case someone should have any doubt about the correctness of the translation we have before us, let me simply point out that the word here rendered 'God' occurs in 22 other places in the Book of Isaiah, and in every one of these it is used either of Jehovah Himself or of some false god – some idol. That is, the word itself excludes any idea that our text has in mind some human warrior-king. Indeed, Isaiah was fully aware of the impassable gulf between the One who is God (as expressed by this Hebrew word) and any mere human beings ... 'The Egyptians are *men*, and *not God* (El), and their horses flesh, and not spirit', Isa. 31. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Isa. 10. 21-22.

<sup>19</sup> Now can you see the importance of context?

<sup>20</sup> And, in days when His deity is denied on all hands, we do well to remind ourselves of a few instances where the writers of the New Testament freely apply to our Saviour titles which Isaiah applied – and reserved – to the Lord God Himself.

We could think, for example, of the title, 'the Lord of hosts', culled by the apostle Peter from chapter 8 ... 'Sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord', 1 Pet. 3. 15, with 'The Lord of hosts, Him shall you sanctify; and let Him be your fear', Isa. 8. 13, and 'The stone which the builders rejected (the Lord Jesus), the same was made the head of the corner; and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence', 1 Pet. 2. 7-8, with 'He (the Lord of hosts) will be a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel', Isa. 8. 14. See too John 12. 38-41 with Isa. 6. 3 (the Lord of hosts', 10; where John in verse 37 has clearly identified the 'Him' of verse 41 as the Lord Jesus.

Or the divine title 'The First and ... the Last' – used three times by Isaiah of the One who declares that beside Him 'there is no God' – and applied three times by John in the Book of the Revelation to our Lord Jesus ... 'He laid His right hand on me, saying, Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore', Rev. 1. 17, with 'Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I

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am the First and I am the Last; besides me there is no God', Isa. 44. 6. See too Isaiah 41. 4 and 48. 12, with Revelation 2. 8 and 22. 13.

Or the divine decree which Isaiah records in chapter 45 that one day every knee will bow and every tongue make confession to the One who asserts that He alone is God – which the apostle Paul applies directly to the Lord Jesus Christ ... 'In the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord', Phil. 2. 10, with 'I the Lord ... I am God, and there is none else. By myself have I sworn, the word is gone forth from my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, that to me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear', Isa. 45. 21-23.

Or the way in which, whereas Isaiah foretold that a voice would one day cry in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord (Jehovah, that is), make straight in the desert a highway for our God', all four gospel accounts see these words fulfilled in the ministry performed by John the Baptist for our Lord Jesus ... 'Prepare the way of the Lord (Jehovah, that is), make straight in the desert a highway for our God', Isa. 40. 3. All three gospel accounts see this fulfilled in the ministry performed by John the Baptist for our Lord Jesus, Matt. 3. 1-3; Mark 1. 1-3; Luke 1. 17; 3. 3-6; John 1. 19-23.

<sup>21</sup> Nor, we ought perhaps note, is our Lord Jesus only 'the mighty God'. He is also 'Almighty God'. 'When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God (possibly, 'the all-sufficient God'); walk before me and be blameless', Gen. 17. 1. Compare this with, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End', says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty", Rev. 1. 8, with 'I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega ... And I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of man', Rev. 1. 11.

<sup>22</sup> 'They form two pairs, and each single name is again compounded of two names', E W Hengstenberg, '*Christology of the Old Testament*', volume 1, page 448.

<sup>23</sup> Isa. 7. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 2.

<sup>25</sup> After the conjunction 'for', they both begin with the word 'child'. The word 'child', in Hebrew, is derived from the word immediately following, 'born'. Not, of course, when Isaiah linked – as he did – the word 'child' with words such as 'government', 'throne' and 'kingdom', he meant that this 'child' would rule as and when a 'child'. The prophet knew well that for a child (inexperienced and unqualified for government) to exercise authority over any kingdom was a sure and certain recipe for disaster – and for oppression, Isa. 3. 12. Indeed, one of the judgements which God would visit on the nation of Isaiah's day was to set young children to rule over it, and to appoint youths to be their advisers, Isa. 3. 4.

<sup>26</sup> And, 'the everlasting Father' is 'a Son given'!

<sup>27</sup> John 18. 37-38.

<sup>28</sup> The Definition (or 'Creed') of Chalcedon, dated 22<sup>nd</sup> October 451. 'That the same person should be "the mighty God" and a "child born" is neither conceivable nor possible, nor can be true, but by the union of the divine and human natures in the same person'. John Owen, '*The Person of Christ*', page 226.

<sup>29</sup> Isa. 6. 1-10 and Isa. 53. 3 (with John 12. 37-41).

<sup>30</sup> John 1. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 19. 35.

<sup>32</sup> John 6. 38.

<sup>33</sup> Phil. 2. 6-7.

<sup>34</sup> 'You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands', Heb. 1. 10.

<sup>35</sup> 'Therefore, in all things He needed to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God', Heb. 2. 17.

<sup>36</sup> 'He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire', Heb. 1. 7.

<sup>37</sup> 'We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels', Heb. 2. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Heb. 2. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Body of Divinity, '*Christ's Humiliation In His Incarnation*' ... Use one: Of instruction (3.)

<sup>40</sup> Heb. 9. 26; 1 John 3. 5.

<sup>41</sup> John 1. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Hark! the Herald Angels Sing. (1739)