

# **In the Wake of Wonderful**

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## Isaiah 9:6

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

In this information age, we are overwhelmed by advice. Advice is available on almost any subject from friends, from strangers, from the internet, or even from strange friends on the internet.

Golfers give each other advice, almost all of it useless at best. Things like: "Don't think about what you're doing, just get up there and swing at it." Or, "Let your body tell you what to do." If my body knew what to do, I'd be Tiger Woods.

Almost any advice that begins with "Just trust me.." is not to be trusted. And some advice is so dumb it just stops you dead in your tracks. When I was living in Spain a native of Valencia once gave me an insider tip on a great paella restaurant in that city. "They'll treat you better if they think you're a native. So, if you go there, don't use your American accent." Umm... oh, never mind.

People who suffer from migraines are subjected to enough bad advice to give you a headache. Brilliant diagnoses like, "It's all in your head." Or the neurologist who counseled his migraine-plagued patient to quit his job and sell Amway.

But why pay for bad medical advice, when you can get it so much more cheaply from friends and family? Classics like, "Oh, childbirth isn't that painful." Or anything that begins with "You know what they say..."

For that matter, why bother to ask anyone at all, when you can just listen to that benighted little voice inside your own head? You know, the one that says, "Oh, you don't need a plumber. Any idiot can fix that."

Sometimes, when you really do need to ask the experts, they don't agree or can't make up their minds. Harry Truman once complained, "'All my economists say, 'on the one hand... and on the other hand...! Someone give me a one-handed economist!'"

With all this bad advice floating around out there, it kind of makes you perk up when you read a verse like Isaiah 9:6, which predicts the coming of a Messiah who will be called

“Wonderful Counselor.” And we begin to think, Wow! I could really use one of those. But in what sense is Christ a Wonderful Counselor? What did Isaiah have in mind?

Our Advent emphasis comes from the four messianic titles found in Isaiah 9:6. We’ll focus on one each week, beginning with “Wonderful Counselor” and then moving on to “Mighty God, Everlasting Father,” and, finally, “Prince of Peace.” Today we want to first say a word about the biblical context in which we find those names. Then we want to think about how Jesus fulfilled this Wonderful Counselor prophecy and what that messianic reality means for us today.

If you step back and take a broad overview of the book of Isaiah, you’ll see that first 39 chapters are mostly doom and gloom, punctuated by a few hopeful passages such as this one. The Israel of David and Solomon had long since been divided into a northern and a southern kingdom, which were known as Israel and Judah. The southern kingdom of Judah had a mixed bag of good and evil rulers. Israel, however, was more consistent. Every last one of its rulers were spiritual losers. Idolatry was rampant. And, so, God removed his blessing from the nation, leaving them vulnerable to an overwhelming external threat.

Chapter 8 of Isaiah ends with a prediction of distress and darkness for Israel. The northernmost provinces of Israel had already been invaded by Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria. Assyria was a fearsome and aggressive empire, and these northern tribes were closest to the Assyrian border.

In Assyria there was no debate about the definition of torture. Torture was what they were going to do to you if you resisted – period. It was state-sponsored terrorism at its very meanest. In a little more than a decade from the time they invaded the north of Israel (733 BC), they controlled the entire country.

As we enter chapter 9, however, verse one ends on a note of hope, that God will one day bless the land he has cursed. Then a poetic prophecy begins in v. 2. As is sometimes the case with prophecy, it is written in the perfect tense, as if it had already happened, even though it was still future. This is partly due to the fact that the seer had already seen it in some sense. But it also emphasizes the certainty of the prophecy. According to this verse a light has dawned (or, in real time, *will dawn*) on this dark region.

In verse six Isaiah describes the source of this light. He will be a child and a son, as viewed from two different perspectives. Messiah will be born a child from the standpoint of people who are alive in the historical moment of his birth. And, as a child born in Israel, they could think of him broadly as a son of the nation or a son of David. But the sonship in view here has a much more far-reaching scope.

Note that this Son is *given*. The Son that was *given* to them, then, was not just one of the many sons of Israel—he was first and foremost the Son of God. “For God so loved the world that he *gave* his one and only Son.”

This title, “Son,” speaks to Christ’s deity, but it’s also refers to his royalty. The king (in this case probably David) was viewed as a son of God. Psalm 2 is a messianic psalm that says in v. 7: “He [that is, the Lord] said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have become your father.’” David’s enthronement and the special relationship he enjoyed with God was a preview of the ultimate ruler—the Messiah, the Son of God.

Continuing on in v. 6, we see that the government will rest upon him. He is not a bureaucrat or a politician or even just a king. Kings needed the help of the military and the priesthood and the prophets. This Messiah will be absolutely sovereign, absolutely capable, and absolutely good. It all rests on him. And verse 7 even informs us that, once established, his reign will be eternal.

Focusing, then, on these names which are so familiar to us in this season of the year, we begin in verse 6 with *Wonderful Counselor*. Let’s think for a moment about this really quite unusual phrase. It appears that the two words are to be understood as a pair, as the NIV translates them. It’s hard to be absolutely certain, however. The King James Version actually places a comma between the words *wonderful* and *counselor*. The phrasing of Handel’s Messiah reflects that same understanding, where the last three names are treated as pairs—mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—but the first two—wonderful and counselor—are distinct.

To complicate matters the word *wonderful* is not an actually adjective but a noun—literally, *wonder*. And *counselor* is a participle, though I know that’s too much grammatical information for many of us. But in any case, Hebrew doesn’t treat these categories in the same way that English does. The Targum and other ancient Jewish sources understood these names to be four pairs. And the parallelism of *Wonderful Counselor* with the other pairs is also a good reason to think that the two belong together.

Of course, the Messiah would be wonderful apart from his role as Counselor, and the Counselor would certainly be wonderful even if not designated as such. So, either way it doesn’t stand to alter our Christology. Perhaps the deciding factor is that we have only four weeks until Christmas, and if we split up *Wonderful* and *Counselor* it will throw a monkey wrench into our Advent plans.

Before we look at what it means for Christ to be a Wonderful Counselor, let’s first consider what doesn’t mean. Most of the ways we employ the word *counselor* tend to confuse rather than clarify the meaning of this verse.

The Hebrew term itself is typically used to refer to an official advisor, someone who offers expertise to a superior. Therefore, *counselor* here is not just an advocate, in the sense of a lawyer. So, while it is true that Jesus is our advocate before God, that’s not in view here. This counselor does not advocate for someone but to someone for something.

Nor does it imply that Christ is our counselor in the sense of being a therapist, one who listens and understands and helps us work through our problems. Christ may do that, but

this ancient role was much more formal, not some kind of personalized care to someone in need.

We must also resist the temptation to see Jesus as our counselor because he sends the Holy Spirit. When Jesus speaks about his sending the Holy Spirit in John 14-16, the NIV tells us that he will send another “counselor.” Some other versions use the word “comforter.” However we view this counseling or comforting ministry of the Holy Spirit, it is not the fulfillment of this prophecy. *Paraclete*, the Greek word used in the New Testament, was sent from a superior to an inferior to come alongside and help. But not here.

Having said what a counselor is not, where does that leave us? If Christ is not our counselor in the ways we might typically imagine, then just what is a Wonderful Counselor?

I believe the answer is twofold. First, Jesus is a Wonderful Counselor in terms of his own governance. And, second, I believe he plays a special role within the counsel of the very triune Godhead.

What does being a Wonderful Counselor have to do with governance? Though Isaiah’s word for counselor is typically applied in the context of official court advisors, we find that it was occasionally used of the rulers themselves. Micah 4:9 provides an example:

Why do you now cry aloud--  
 have you no king?  
 Has your counselor perished,  
 that pain seizes you like that of a woman in labor?

When you see it in verse form, it’s easier to appreciate the parallelism. In the first and the last lines, “crying aloud” and the “pain of the woman in labor,” both refer to the same painful desperation. But the second and third lines are also synonymous parallels. Having no king and having your counselor perish are referring to the same loss of leadership.

Conclusion? The king can also be referred to as a counselor. The defining quality of a counselor was that of being a very wise person. Here the king, as a wise ruler, gives the benefit of his wisdom to the nation through enlightened leadership.

There is at least one other occasion in which the word *counselor* is used to refer to a ruler. Look at Isaiah 1:26: “I will restore your leaders as in days of old, your rulers as at the beginning.” Literally, these “leaders” are *judges*, and the “rulers” are *counselors*, the same word used in Isaiah 9:6.

The judges that Israel had had in days of old were not like their current magistrates. They were people like Moses and Joshua and Gideon. They were actually leaders or rulers, which the NIV captures with its translation. And in this construction the term *counselors* is clearly parallel to *judges*, so it seems best to understand them as rulers who will once again lend their wisdom to the direction of the nation.

This ultimate king, the Messiah, has no need of human advisors. That doesn't mean he has no need of wisdom or knowledge. It's just that God is a special case. He has no need of human advisors, because he himself knows what is best. Isaiah 40:13-14: "Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?"

These are obviously rhetorical questions, to which the answer is—nobody. Because God's wisdom is sufficient. He is his own counselor. Ephesians 1:11 speaks of "the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the *purpose* (or, in some translations, *counsel*) of his will."

God doesn't need to commission a study or take a straw vote or have a cabinet meeting or float a referendum. He can figure it out all by himself. He is a counselor, but to himself on behalf of his kingdom.

So, God has no need of outside counsel. But what about an in-house counselor? What might that mean? Here we get into a somewhat more speculative area. And, yet, I believe that there is Scriptural evidence that Christ makes a special advisory contribution to the deliberations of the Godhead of which he is a part. And this is the second aspect of his role as counselor.

Many of our theological notions about God are based more on Greek philosophy than they are on Scripture. We posit certain *omni* characteristics of God, like omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. Then we add a healthy dose of immutability and a big, old dollop of infinity, and out pops an unmoved mover who's really quite super but doesn't exactly remind you of Jehovah. For example, some classical theological definitions of God's omniscience say that God has always known everything that is, was, will be, or could be as a simple and eternal attribute of his being. No real process, just an unavoidable, inevitable, intuitive, and exhaustive knowledge.

In the Bible, however, you find him perceiving, reasoning, planning, deliberating, and deciding. We can grant that some of these descriptions are anthropomorphic—that is, they explain God in human terms we can relate to. Those anthropomorphisms are helpful if God's intellectual process is simply different than ours. But if there is no rational process to speak of, then these anthropomorphic descriptions do not help us to understand anything. All they can do is mislead us.

So, I conclude that some kind of deliberation occurs within the Godhead. And Christ, as a result of his human experience, brings a unique perspective. James tells us that God the Father cannot be tempted, but Jesus, as the God-man, could and did experience temptation. And for that reason, the Second Person of the Trinity has been put in charge of judgment. John 5:22, 27: "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.... And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of

Man.”

The fact that there is love shared within the Trinity implies a kind of dynamic rather than static relationship, one in which some communication takes place. And we know, according to Romans 8:34, that Jesus is at the right hand of God, interceding for us. So, he is bringing something to the attention of the Father. In fact, the very metaphor of his placement at the Father’s right hand gives him not only a platform for ruling but a kind of advisory position within the Holy Trinity.

So, when the prophet Isaiah refers to the Messiah as a counselor, what he is describing is a rather unique position. Jesus is a counselor in the sense of having the expertise to be a wise ruler of the kingdom the Father has given him. But he is also a counselor in his relationship to the Father within the Trinity—the perfect counselor who has had the experience of living incarnate within his own creation. The baby born in Bethlehem, who began in the humblest of circumstances, has been elevated to the highest possible position as the cosmic counselor. It is, I’ll admit, a mind-bending and mind-boggling concept.

It takes a little work to establish what it means for Christ to be *Counselor*. In contrast, his designation as *Wonderful* is no mystery at all. Lots of praise music talks about just how wonderful he is. “His name is wonderful, his name is wonderful, his name is wonderful, Jesus my Lord.” *What a Wonderful Savior, Wonderful Grace of Jesus, Wonderful, Merciful Savior, Isn’t He Wonderful, Bless that Wonderful Name of Jesus, More than Wonderful.*

Jesus, the Messiah, possesses the qualities that make him wonderful, and everyone from trained theologians to Sunday school youngsters find themselves full of wonder in his presence. And he created this same sensation during his earthly ministry. Mark 9:15: “As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.” On eight different occasions Luke tells us that the crowds of people were “amazed” by Jesus. Christ is the historical figure who has inspired more wonder in more people than any other.

So, we get it. Christ is wonderful. But what, specifically, does it mean that he is a Wonderful *Counselor*? As I mentioned earlier, the word translated *wonderful* actually appears as a noun in the original text. And that makes it all the more striking. It’s like the difference between a wonderful woman and Wonder Woman. A wonderful woman might just be nice, but Wonder Woman has supernatural powers and a star-spangled uniform. The promised Messiah is not just a super-nice guy, he is supernatural as well.

Scripture uses this same term to refer to many of God’s great miracles as *wonders*. So, what Christ brings to his role as counselor is not just a great résumé for wise governance or a superior ability; he brings supernatural power to the job. And it doesn’t stop there. The fact that he is wonderful points to his deity, that Messiah is God himself.

In Judges 13 the Angel of the Lord appears to Manoah and predicts the birth of his son, Samson. In v. 17 Manoah asks the angel, “What is your name, so that we may honor you

when your word comes true?’ Verse 18: He replied, ‘Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding.’” The word translated *beyond understanding* is rendered in other translations as *wonderful*. And this tips us off that this Angel of the Lord is, in fact, divine—a pre-incarnate appearance of the Second Person of the Trinity. So, when this baby born in Bethlehem is called *wonderful*, using the same root word as Judges 13, it doesn’t just imply that he is extraordinary; it signals that he is God.

So, we have filtered our initial impressions about what a Wonderful Counselor might or could be through a biblical and theological grid. And we have seen what this designation has to do with Christ’s rule and his relationships within the Trinity. But what does it mean for us to live today in the wake of wonderful? How does this truth impact us?

First, it impacts our discipleship. As Jesus’ followers, we have acknowledged Christ’s Lordship, but we sometimes have a faulty picture of the one we are following. We carry around the image of Jesus and his disciples as a hippie-like band of counter-cultural, anti-establishment spiritual activists alternately confronting and avoiding the authorities. And we just Photoshop our picture into the gang.

Well, following Jesus remains a counter-cultural lifestyle. But there is another, parallel reality at work here. As a ruling Wonderful Counselor, Jesus Christ has already been exalted to God’s right hand. He is right now Lord of a vast, eternal kingdom and wields awesome power. He’s not just waiting for his moment.

So, we don’t follow him just because it’s a hip alternative; we follow him because he is the only real spiritual authority and reigns even now as an all-wise counselor, and all-wise ruler. Not only will our loyalty to him shake up the kingdoms of this world, our adherence to his leadership will create the right sort of life here and now, a life lived in a kingdom ruled by God’s wisdom.

But there is another way in which I believe we are called to live in the wake of wonderful. If this Wonderful Counselor is good enough for God, then he ought to be more than good enough for me as well.

I’m wearing a new suit today. Well, almost new. Even before we moved to DC, I had struck up a friendship with George de Paris, who was a tailor to every president since Lyndon Johnson. A while back I was visiting him in his shop, and he told me that one of his clients had traded in a couple of almost new, hand-made suits on some brand-new ones. He said, “They’ll be big, but I think I can cut them down and make them fit you.” So, what did I have to lose? If he’s good enough for the President, he’s good enough for me.

Jesus is the ultimate adviser in the most powerful inner circle in the universe. And, yet, inexplicably, many of us listen to his advice only when all else fails. Or spend so much time reading and listening to every other expert’s advice on everything under the sun that we find ourselves embarrassingly ignorant of God’s revelation through Christ.

Since the very Spirit of Christ lives within us, we have access to the greatest storehouse of wisdom ever. But how are you capitalizing on that opportunity? If he's good enough for God, he ought to be good enough for you and me.

Yes, our relationship with this Wonderful Counselor should affect our lifestyle. But living in the wake of wonderful should also affect our worship. This wonder-counselor puts me in mind of the German *wunder*, as in *wunderkind*, a prodigy. This messianic *wunder*-counselor has no peer; he is one of an amazing kind.

We don't just celebrate his birth to honor him as a great historical figure; we worship him as God. There are any number of great people who get a day named after them. But worship belongs solely to the One who is different not only in degree but in kind, because he is wonderful and even more than wonderful to us.

[Scott singing / To hear Sandi Patty and Lionel Harris reprise their 1984 recording in 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRTwUvZG5a0>] "He's more wonderful than my mind can conceive, he's more wonderful than my heart can believe. He goes beyond my highest hopes and fondest dreams. He's everything that my soul ever longed for, everything he promised and so much more. He's more than amazing, more than marvelous, more than miraculous, could ever be. He's more than wonderful, that's what Jesus is to me."

May we celebrate this Christmas in the wake of wonderful, our Wonderful Counselor.

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