

Mighty in the Scriptures

Genesis 10:6–20, Acts 18:24–28

Our Old Testament text today describes Nimrod, the son of Cush: “he began to be a *mighty* one on the earth [גִּבּוֹר בְּאָרְץ]. He was a *mighty* hunter [גִּבּוֹר-צֹיֵד] before the Lord; therefore it is said, ‘Like Nimrod the *mighty* hunter [גִּבּוֹר צֹיֵד] before the Lord.’” Here, in a terse description of a notable man, are *three* occurrences of the word “mighty.” That sets this text apart! Nimrod was powerful in physical strength; his hunting ability was legendary. What did he hunt? Wild game or men? Either sense is possible. In any case Nimrod was “a *mighty* one on the earth”—a force to be reckoned with in the ancient world.

In our New Testament text today we are introduced to a man named Apollos, a man who was “*mighty* in the Scriptures” (KJV, NKJV, NASB). The ESV translates it as “competent,” but that doesn’t really do it justice. *Competent* means *properly or sufficiently qualified*, but Apollos’s ability to use the Scriptures was not just sufficient but *outstanding*! He was “mighty”! The word in the original is δυνατός (*powerful, strong, mighty*) from which we get our word *dynamite*. The noun form δύναμις can be translated *mighty work, miracle*. Indeed, Apollos was “*mighty* in the Scriptures.” Nimrod was a mighty hunter, Apollos was mighty in the Scriptures.

Which is better, to be mighty in physical strength, or to be mighty in the Scriptures? Christian, are you mighty in the Scriptures? Do you want to be?

Consider the context. The apostle Paul has preached the gospel in Ephesus, but he needed to get to Jerusalem because of a vow he had taken, and from there he returned to report to his sending church in Antioch in Syria. His departure left a void in the church in Ephesus, and in the providence of God Apollos has arrived on the scene to fill that void. Apollos is mighty in the Scriptures and refutes the Jews publicly, proving from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

Apollos is from Alexandria, a city in Egypt that had been built by Alexander the great. Large numbers of Jews lived there, and it was in Alexandria that the Hebrew Bible had been translated into Greek—a translation known to us as the Septuagint. Apollos had been “*instructed* in the way of the Lord.” The word for “instructed” is the Greek word κατηρέω (literally, *echo back*), from which we get our word *catechism*. To *catechize* is to instruct in religious matters, generally by using questions and answers, the teacher giving out the question, and the student replying with the answer. This is the method used in our Shorter Catechism, which begins, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Apollos is a man born again by the Holy Spirit of God. He has a correct understanding of the Scriptures. He “spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John” and did not fully understand Christian baptism. When Aquila and Priscilla heard this eloquent man

speak in the synagogue, they did not interrupt but “took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.” Here was a quiet couple, a husband and wife, instructing a silver-tongued orator. It is significant that both husband and wife instructed Apollos. This shows us that though a woman is not to preach or teach publicly in the church during the formal worship service on the Lord’s day, it is proper for a woman to teach privately, in this case, in concert with her husband. My dear sisters, you, too, should endeavor to be mighty in the Scriptures! A godly woman can be a great force for truth. Think of the influence Priscilla had as she corrected the eloquent Apollos, as he was used by the Lord to evangelize the Jews of Ephesus and beyond. Apollos proved to be a gifted man and a gift to the church, particularly in Paul’s absence. No man is indispensable; God has his ways of accomplishing his work, whether through one man or another. Paul would later write, “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3:6). God will certainly accomplish his plan. It will not fail. Amen.

Our text this morning highlights a number of qualities of Apollos; let’s look at them in turn. First,

1. Eloquent

We are told that Apollos was “an eloquent man” (v. 24). Eloquence is discourse marked by force and persuasiveness. An eloquent person is a person who is gifted in public speaking, gifted in the use of words. Apollos’s eloquence set him apart from other great men in the Bible.

When God called Moses and wanted to send him to Egypt, Moses protested and said, “O my Lord, I am *not* eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” In the Hebrew the phrase translated “I am not eloquent” is, literally, “I am not a man of words.”¹ He protested: “I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Moses was good at writing; he could write good legal briefs. He could write legislation, and God used him to do that, but he was not a glib public speaker who could dazzle people with his use of words. His words that are preserved for us in the book of Deuteronomy are indeed powerful words—powerful for their truth—but he was naturally slow of speech and slow of tongue.

Paul, too, was not a naturally gifted orator. He writes to the church at Corinth, “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with *excellence of speech* or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God.”² His detractors would later say of him, “his letters . . . are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech *contemptible*.”³ How ironic that the two men who gave us large swaths of the Old and New Testament Scriptures were not naturally gifted at public

¹ לא איש דְּבָרִים אֲנֹכִי

² 1 Cor. 2:1

³ 2 Cor. 10:10

speaking. On the other hand, later in Acts we will read of an orator named Tertullus, who will present the Jews' case against the apostle Paul before Governor Felix. Tertullus was an orator,⁴ but he spoke against the gospel and ultimately went to hell. The apostle Paul was not a natural orator, but he spoke the truth and shows us the way to heaven. The natural man would rather have his ears tickled than hear the truth. In the last letter he ever penned Paul would write to Timothy, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears *tickled*, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires."⁵

Now there's nothing intrinsically wrong with natural eloquence, and if God has gifted you that way, then use it for him. But it's better to find a faithful church where you are taught the truth of the gospel than to sit under a spellbinding orator who dazzles people with his speech but doesn't speak God's truth. When you are looking for a church you want to find *truth* above all else. And what is the truth? We are all sinners deserving of eternal hell-fire. Our only hope of heaven is the Lord Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and man; he, the sinless one, took our sins upon him and gives us his perfect righteousness which alone qualifies us to stand in the presence of a holy God. The church cannot save; our best works cannot save; only Christ can save. The natural man finds this truth offensive, but to the person born again by the Holy Spirit it is like a refreshing drink of water in a dry and thirsty land. What a relief to know that though we have fallen short of God's perfect standard, and continue to fall short, every day of our lives, we have a mighty Savior who has perfectly accomplished what we failed to do, and by looking to him in faith, our sins are washed away, and we are credited with his perfect righteousness. That is a promise that can never be taken away from us. Amen. Second, Apollos was

2. Mighty in the Scriptures (v. 24)

Our text tells us that Apollos was "*mighty* in the Scriptures."⁶ As we said before, the word "mighty" (δυνατός) means *powerful*. Here was a man who had a powerful command of Scripture. He knew the Bible. He had committed much of it to memory and knew how to use it; he could make cogent and forceful arguments as he "vigorously refuted⁷ the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ." We might say that Apollos was gifted at apologetics—reasoned arguments validating biblical teaching. Apologetics is the defense of the faith. It is an encouragement to God's people that our Christian faith is defensible. Believing in Christ is not a leap in the dark. There are powerful and valid and cogent reasons

⁴ ῥήτωρ, a public speaker, orator (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich), the only occurrence of this word (Acts 24:1)

⁵ 2 Tim. 4:3 NASB, translating κνήθω, itch, figuratively "of curiosity, that looks for interesting and spicy bits of information" (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich)

⁶ δυνατός ὢν ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς

⁷ διακατελέγχωμαι, *refute completely* (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich)

for believing the Christian message. It is coherent, reasonable. It makes sense. Consider the Bible. It was written by about forty different human authors over a period of 1600 years. Its subject is religion, a highly controversial subject over which different people have strong personal opinions. Yet the Bible has a cohesive, unified message. Its forty human authors writing over a 1600-year period speak with one voice, the voice of God. There is an amazing harmony. Moreover, there are dozens of very specific prophecies that are fulfilled perfectly. The central character is Christ—his death, burial and resurrection. Repeatedly he had said, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.”⁸ Here is a very specific prophecy. Its fulfillment depends not only on Christ himself, but also on what his enemies would do. They would kill him, but he would rise again on the third day. This prophecy was given publicly, over and over, and was witnessed by many people. If it didn’t come true, Christ would be exposed as a liar and false prophet. But it came true, exactly as he said! Christ was crucified by his enemies and rose again the third day, exactly as he said! Where is the evidence that he rose from the dead? The resurrection of Christ was witnessed by the apostles, and on one occasion by over 500 different people. These people went to martyrs’ deaths rather than recant. Not one of them said, “OK, I give. Jesus didn’t really rise from the dead. I made that part up. Please don’t put me to death.” There is more evidence for the resurrection of Christ than for any event in ancient history. Apollos was a gifted apologist, vigorously refuting the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. People were saved under his ministry.

Note what the Bible says about Apollos: he was “mighty in the Scriptures.” Nimrod was mighty physically. He was a body-builder. He was naturally gifted with a strong physique. He was the Muhammad Ali of his day. He had trained and had quick reflexes and could defeat his enemies. But Apollos was mighty in the *Scriptures*. He knew his Bible and could use it to defend the faith. Think of that phrase again: “mighty in the *Scriptures*.” The Scriptures are holy *writings*, a written record of the very words of God. We had family over last night, and the grandchildren began to play the telephone game. The first player whispered a phrase into the ear of the person sitting next to him, who passed it along to the next one and the next, and so on. Several times the message became garbled. But the Holy Scriptures are a *written* record. It is definitely *not* oral tradition that becomes garbled in transmission. The original autographs have been lost, but there are hundreds of manuscript witnesses that can be compared and studied. Most

⁸ E.g. Mark 10:33–34

variations have to do with word order or the spelling of proper names. The true text can be determined by multiple witnesses.

The written Scriptures are the church's source of authority. Scripture is not one source of authority among many but the church's *only* source of authority. In a recent sermon I said that "All Christians agree that the Bible is authoritative, though not all practice this consistently. Some have other sources of authority, such as human tradition. This of necessity neutralizes the authority of Scripture. Others are mystical, seeking promptings or inward leadings of the Spirit. This takes attention away from God and focuses it on man. Only a consistent appeal to Scripture alone gives God undisputed rule in his church."⁹

For Orthodox Presbyterians, Scripture is the final authority. The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it this way: "The *supreme judge* by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."¹⁰

Christian tradition is not authoritative; *Scripture* is authoritative. Apollos was mighty in the *Scripture*. May we each endeavor to be as well. Thirdly, Apollos was **3. Fervent in spirit (v. 25)**

The original Greek can be translated *boiling in spirit*.¹¹ Room-temperature water in a vessel is quiet, still. But heat that water up in a kettle and it boils. We have a kettle with a window in its side. As we watch the water come to a boil we can here the noise of the boiling, and through the window we can see it bubbling and swirling more and more ferociously as it approaches the boiling point of 212°. Once it reaches boiling point, we can pour it into a cup to make tea.

A born-again person who is fervent in spirit is a person who takes his faith seriously. He is not passive, indifferent, unemotional, unmoved, detached. He stands up for the honor of Christ. The truth of the gospel is something that is very important to him. When it is slandered, he rises to its defense. Apollos was very passionate about the gospel. He believed it. He knew that without Christ he was lost and on his way to eternal fire. He knew that he had broken God's holy law. He knew that he was guilty before the judgment bar of almighty God. He knew that he had no hope of eternal life without Christ. He knew that his people, the Jews, had rejected Christ and had called for Barabbas, a robber, murderer and insurrectionist, to be released in his place. But when he was born again by the Holy Spirit, Apollos had become convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. He became a follower of Christ and placed all his hope of eternal life in him. He was

⁹ https://all-of-grace.org/sermon_manuscripts/2022-05-01_Acts_16_6_God's_Guidance.pdf

¹⁰ https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_01

¹¹ ζέων τῷ πνεύματι

not one to keep quiet about his faith. He became a preacher, apologist and evangelist and was greatly used by God.

The church in our day could use people who are fervent in spirit. Many people who attend worship are passive. Their minds wander as the word of God is preached. They do not sing with the congregation as the word of God is sung. They do not pray with the congregation as the word of God is prayed. They think to themselves, when is this going to be over? They hear the gospel and are unmoved. Luke observes that Apollos was fervent (lit. *boiling*) in spirit. Later, Paul will write the epistle to the Romans and he will say that the Christian should be “not slothful in business; fervent (*boiling*) in spirit; serving the Lord” (Rom. 12:11). In other words, we shouldn’t just go home from here today saying, “Apollos was fervent in spirit—that’s nice.” No! Clearly being fervent in spirit is God’s will for every Christian. Now some of us are naturally more animated, others are naturally more passive. But all of us can pray, “Lord, help me to be fervent in spirit, help me to care about the things you care about. Help me not to be passive about the things of the Lord.” Some expressions of Christianity are known for their emotionalism. The purpose of worship is not to whip people up into an emotional frenzy. But Christians ought to be animated over the *content* of the gospel. Heaven and hell are real, it is a life-and-death matter. Christ sets before us life and death and wants us to choose life. God, help us to be fervent in spirit! Fourthly, Apollos was

4. Bold (v. 26)

“He began to speak boldly in the synagogue” (v. 26). Boldness is *a brave and confident way of behaving that shows no fear*.¹² This can be a personality trait. Perhaps Apollos was a naturally confident person. But there is a such thing as “holy boldness” that can be developed. Think of the martyrs threatened with being burned at the stake. It is said that Saint Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles, who died as a martyr, was skinned alive. It is becoming evident that more and more people are calling for the death of Christians, who are called “homophobes” and “transphobes” and “intolerant” for holding to the ideal of biblical marriage. In such an atmosphere Christians must pray for boldness, asking God for the grace to put fidelity to Christ over personal comfort and quietude. Paul prayed, “According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all *boldness*, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death” (Phil. 1:20). May that be our prayer as well! Would you still worship Christ if it became illegal? I hope so! To be a Christian involves a commitment to worship him. To fail to worship Christ is to reject him for an idol. What will be the most important thing in your life?

¹² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/boldness> accessed 9-25-22

Apollos was eloquent, mighty in the Scriptures, fervent in spirit, and bold. As we close, let's focus on just one of these: mighty in the Scriptures. Earlier we spoke of Nimrod, the mighty hunter. The word for mighty is גִּבּוֹר which means *manly, vigorous, hero, champion*. It is noteworthy that Christ himself is prophetically called "mighty God" (אֵל גִּבּוֹר) in Isaiah 9:6, "unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the *mighty God*, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." Jesus is called in Hebrew "mighty God" (אֵל גִּבּוֹר).

After his crucifixion, burial and resurrection, as he walked along the road to Emmaus with two disciples who had not yet heard that he had arisen from the dead, he asked the men, "What kind of conversation is this that you have with one another as you walk and are sad?" One of them, Cleopas, made reference to the things that had recently happened in Jerusalem, to which Jesus replied, "What things?" Cleopas replied, "The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet *mighty* in deed and word [δυνατὸς ἐν ἔργῳ καὶ λόγῳ] before God and all the people." Jesus was *mighty* in deed and word. The word for "mighty" is the same word used for Apollos: "mighty [δυνατός] in the Scriptures."

Now you and I might not attain to the same level of expertise as Apollos, the apostle Paul, or our Lord Jesus, but *we can try!* With God's help let us be diligent to be mighty in the Scriptures. Amen.