

1. Context of Isaiah 61: Looking to the Future.
 - a. The OT text for today, as most of the text from Isaiah 40 on, speaks of the deliverance of Judah from exile and the redemption of God's people. What can be confusing is that it speaks of these things as though they are present realities for the author as opposed to the prophet speaking about a coming future reality. To read the whole book makes it clearer, but 66 chapters is a bit much to read in church on Sunday morning.
 - b. Isaiah lived prior to and during the early years of the exile, but wasn't alive for the return home. The language of the passages often shifts from sounding like it is in the present to an "I will" type of speaking from God.
 - c. Our reading for today isn't a present-day narrative by the prophet which we transcribe to be a messianic prophecy. It is in fact a look into the future for the coming salvation of Judah. While the Jews generally read these prophecies as strictly relating to Judah's return from exile, the scope seems to look beyond that.
 - d. Much of what is said can't be attributed simply to the return from exile, but must look to Christmas and even beyond to find the fullness of its completion.
2. God's deliverance.
 - a. "For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations." (61:11) "The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory." (62:2)
 - b. In the next few verses after our reading, "The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: 'I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink your wine for which you have labored; ⁹ but those who garner it shall eat it and praise the Lord, and those who gather it shall drink it in the courts of my sanctuary.'" (62:8-9)
 - c. The reason that the passage must look beyond the return from the exile is because some of the things in these chapters, such as what I have just quoted, didn't happen in the return from exile.
 - d. They do, however, happen, or at least begin to happen through the coming of Christ. Even then, the full context is understood that the second coming will bring the total fulfillment of the messianic prophecies.
 - e. For example, God did not cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations by returning Judah from exile. However, Jesus Christ is exulted as lord over all and all nations will sing his praise. In fact, within a few hundred years of Jesus' death, most of the known world knew of Jesus and the most powerful empire on earth had been transformed from pagan to a Christian empire.

- f. Likewise, the nations didn't see God's vindication or all the kings his glory by Judah returning to Jerusalem. They saw God's vindication in the resurrection of Christ and the kings of the nations, which refers to any pagan land, saw God's glory in Christ to the point where ultimately Christianity went from a small and persecuted religion to the dominant religion of most nations, all in a relatively short period of time.
 - g. Even to the point where in the first few centuries the Christian Church was sending missionaries to very hostile areas not under Roman control, and upon hearing the news of Jesus Christ, nation after nation, tribe after tribe converted and believed.
 - h. Of course, the most notable example from the quotes I gave was the last one. God swore by his own hand that the grains of his people would not be given to be food to their enemies. In other words, God's people would not be overthrown or exiled. This isn't true of Israel, however. By Jesus's day, they were occupied by the Romans and by around 70 AD the temple had again been destroyed and Israel dispersed.
 - i. This prophecy is only fulfilled in Christ, again as Christians went from a small group of believers, even in the face of murderous persecution, and grew into the dominant religion of the world.
3. Isaiah and Christmas
- a. So, the message of Isaiah looks beyond the immediate context of exile, and does in fact look forward to Christmas and beyond.
 - b. This shows us that God was indeed working out his redemptive plan all the while with an eye on Christmas. Since all of God's plan ultimately points to Christ, and only comes to fruition in Christ, it brings us back to the fact that the birth of Christ is the down payment of faith.
 - c. What I mean is that much of God's plan has already been fulfilled in Christ through his birth, death, and resurrection. But there is still more to come. The down payment on Christmas morning gives us a reasonable faith; a reasonable expectation that God will continue to make good on his promises and will ultimately bring his plan to final fulfillment.
 - d. Our passage from Isaiah does make clear that God had a plan for redemption. That plan was much bigger than a return of Judah from exile. The plan involved the return of God's people from spiritual exile through a savior who would deliver us from our sins. Thanks to the large scope of God's redemptive plan, even 2000 years after Christ we are still able to be a part of that redemption.
 - e. Thanks to this redemption, we can each proudly proclaim as Isaiah did, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God."