



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
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**Instead . . .**  
**Isaiah 61:1-9**

You know, a word, just a single word, can be a powerful thing, can't it?

Take the word *but* for instance. Have you ever had someone talking to you saying good things about something or someone—maybe even about you—when all of a sudden, you got the feeling that the little word “but” was about to change the entire tenor of the conversation? Those three little letters, *b-u-t*, taken together, can change everything that's been said!

Or take the word *if*. You hear it everywhere: “If so-and-so had happened, then . . .” I can't tell you how many times through the years if my drives hadn't hooked or sliced or drawn or faded, or if my approach shot had just been a little more accurate or my putts a little slower or a little faster or more to the right or left—well, you get the idea. It all kind of falls into that category of country wisdom that responds to those *ifs* with the sage reply, “Yes, and if a bullfrog had wings, he could fly!”

Our text for this third Sunday of Advent has one of those powerful words in it, depending on which translation you're reading it from. It's a little bigger word than *but* or *if*, but it's every bit as powerful. It occurs several times in this text, and it's vitally important in understanding what the text is saying. As you listen to the word of the Lord through His prophet, see if you can catch which word it is.

**Isaiah 61:1-9**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD 's favor  
and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
<sup>3</sup> and provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
 a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.  
<sup>4</sup> They will rebuild the ancient ruins  
 and restore the places long devastated;  
 they will renew the ruined cities  
 that have been devastated for generations.  
<sup>5</sup> Aliens will shepherd your flocks;  
 foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.  
<sup>6</sup> And you will be called priests of the LORD,  
 you will be named ministers of our God.  
 You will feed on the wealth of nations,  
 and in their riches you will boast.  
<sup>7</sup> Instead of their shame  
 my people will receive a double portion,  
 and instead of disgrace  
 they will rejoice in their inheritance;  
 and so they will inherit a double portion in their land,  
 and everlasting joy will be theirs.  
<sup>8</sup> “For I, the LORD, love justice;  
 I hate robbery and iniquity.  
 In my faithfulness I will reward them  
 and make an everlasting covenant with them.  
<sup>9</sup> Their descendants will be known among the nations  
 and their offspring among the peoples.  
 All who see them will acknowledge  
 that they are a people the LORD has blessed.”

Did you catch it? It’s the word *instead* . . . The way the prophet used it speaks a powerful message about what God was intending to do, doesn’t it?

### ***The LORD’s word to His people***

The prophet was addressing a people in despair. So many of the oracles we find in the last section of the book of Isaiah are messages that were intended for the people of Judah who returned from Babylon after the exile. And they needed these words from the LORD!

Their hopes were high and their dreams were big. Judah would be restored, David’s kingdom would be re-established, and all would be glory! That’s what they were dreaming of and what they were hoping for. But when they returned, they found that most of what Nebuchadnezzar’s army had destroyed was still in ruins, especially in Jerusalem. Even the temple was nothing but a burned-out shell.

So they were in mourning and despair. But God had a word for them!

In vv. 1-3 the prophet announced his call and commission. He said that the Spirit of the Sovereign LORD was on him because the LORD had anointed him to “preach good news to the poor” and had sent him “to bind up the brokenhearted,” and “to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor” and the day of God’s vengeance. The LORD had sent him, he said, “to comfort all who mourn,” to give to those grieving in Zion “a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead

of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” In other words, he was sent to proclaim God’s sure and gracious purpose! All the customary signs of mourning—sackcloth and ashes, unkempt appearance, everything that demonstrated mourning and despair—God would replace with signs of blessing and joy and praise!

The LORD would bring restoration through them in such a way that the nations would respect and relate to them as priests of God. Through serving them, caring for them, and supporting them, the nations would free God’s people to accomplish His purpose. So instead of shame His people would receive a double portion, so that instead of disgrace they would rejoice in their inheritance (61:7).

God’s action in all this would be based on *His* character—He loves justice and hates robbery and iniquity, so out of His faithfulness He would reward them and make His everlasting covenant with them. And the nations would “see them and acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed” (61:8-9).

So in sublime terms, *the prophet announced his call to proclaim God’s great instead to His mourning people.*

### ***Hopes deferred, dreams unfulfilled***

For hundreds of years the Jewish people looked for the fulfillment of these promises. There were some blessings, and there was some rebuilding, including the temple. But the kingdom was never restored, and the temple was not nearly so glorious as the one Solomon had built.

When the exiles had returned, they were still under the power of Persia. And before long, the Persians fell before Alexander the Great as he and his Greek armies went about conquering the world. After Alexander’s death, his empire was divided among four of his generals. By the second century B.C., the Seleucids, Syrian heirs to one portion of the Greek empire, were ruling Palestine. Their leader was Antiochus IV, who had arrogantly taken the name “Epiphanes” (which means “The Manifest,” implying that he was a god). After he decided to try to make all his subjects adopt the Greek lifestyle and religion, he tried to wipe out those Jews who refused. The priest Mattathias and his sons, especially Judas Maccabeus (“the Hammerer”) successfully resisted these efforts and cleansed and rededicated the temple. Antiochus had defiled the temple by setting up an altar to the Greek god Zeus in it and offering a pig as a sacrifice on the altar. That was in 167 B.C. By 164 B.C. the Maccabees won the Jews’ religious freedom, and by 142 B.C., they threw off Seleucid rule and established their independence.

This independence lasted for 79 years, but even with this, the Davidic kingdom wasn’t established. The people were ruled by the high priest, which quickly led to the corruption of the high priesthood. By 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey intervened in a fierce Jewish political conflict and annexed Palestine to the empire, placing it under Roman control.

And that’s how things had been for about 90 years when Jesus claimed this passage from Isaiah as *His* mission statement when He read it in the synagogue service in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21).

### ***So what . . . ?***

Now you may be sitting there thinking to yourself, “Well, that’s all well and good, but what does this text have to do with Advent and Christmas? And more importantly, what does it have to do with me today?”

Well, to answer the first question, in Advent we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus. We also focus on preparing ourselves for His return in glory. Advent looks *forward* to

Christmas and to Christ's return, the resurrection morning and the consummation of God's kingdom. Jesus declared that He came to do the things this passage talks about.

As for the second question, the way this text relates to us today is that *at Christmas, we celebrate God's great instead, which we can know through faith in Christ.*

Think about that for a minute—through Jesus, God gives us His great *instead*.

Through what He has done in Jesus Christ, God gives us *deliverance instead of destruction* . . . . As John 3:16 tells us, God “gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (NASB).

Through Christ God gives us *a relationship instead of rejection* . . . . He has every right to reject us because of our sin, but instead He brings us into a right relationship with Him through Christ's life, death on the cross, and resurrection.

In Christ God gives us *justification instead of justice* . . . . Rather than leaving us alienated from Himself because of our sin to suffer justly for eternity in hell, on the basis of Christ's obedience and righteousness, He justifies us, setting us right with Him and working in us to make us righteous.

By Jesus' sacrificial life and death and by His resurrection power, God gives us *salvation instead of separation* . . . . It would have been easy in one sense for God simply to have washed His hands of us. But He was determined to save a people for Himself out of our rebellious human race. And so in Christ, He did away with the sin that separated us from Him and from one another, and saved us by His marvelous grace!

And because He has wrought all this in Christ, He gives us *delight instead of despair* . . . . No matter how hard the trial, how difficult the circumstances, how bleak the prospect, we can look to Christ and the salvation God has brought us in Him and find delight when others are in despair!

Think about the absolute magnitude of this! Imagine a criminal standing before the judge for sentencing. He tells the criminal, “Your crime calls for a mandatory death sentence. But I have the power to show you mercy. Someone else has already died on your behalf, and if you will accept it and depend on what he has done, trusting that he has borne your sentence for you, I will set you free . . . .”

***Only by faith . . .***

You see, it's *only* by faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior that we can know and experience God's great *instead*! It's only by trusting Jesus that we can experience His deliverance and justification and salvation and a right relationship with Him.

This kind of faith is so simple and yet so profound. It is simple trust, simply taking God at His word. It's more than just believing the facts about Jesus in our heads. It's believing them in such a way that we make a commitment to Him in our hearts. We turn from our ways to His ways, from ourselves and our self-will to Him and His will. We give ourselves up to Him completely, depending on Him to do for us what we can't do for ourselves.

There really is *no other way*! As Paul put it in Ephesians 2:8-10 (NASB):

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this not of yourselves,  
it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.  
For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,  
which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Indeed, it was in sublime terms that the prophet announced his commission to proclaim God's great instead to His people. And at Christmas, we celebrate this great instead, realizing that we can know it only through faith in Jesus.

So as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth and as we look forward to His return, for each of us personally, it comes down to this question. *Have you experienced God's great instead in your life?*

If you haven't, you can, right now, right where you are. Simply put your faith in Jesus, trusting Him as your Lord and Savior. Yield your life to Him and ask Him to forgive you and to deliver you and to set things right between Him and you.

Instead of depending on yourself, depend on Christ.

Instead of continuing in your own way that will ultimately lead to your destruction, turn to Him and follow His way that leads to eternal life.

Instead of trying to earn your way into a right relationship with God—something you can never achieve—simply receive His free gift of grace and be saved.

†MEG