

## Story of George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*

Initially, George Frideric Handel didn't want to write the oratorio *Messiah*. He had been writing Italian operas ever since he was nineteen. Times change, however, and financial considerations demanded that he try something different.

Handel was born in Halle, Germany, but he spent most of his life in England. He went there because, for an opera composer, "England, of all European countries, was the least exploited." Arriving in 1710, Handel spent the next three decades writing dozens of operas. However, Italian opera was never a financial success in England. They were expensive to produce and audiences were slim. The superstar Italian imports demanded exorbitant salaries, the English audiences preferred less serious fare and, frankly, something in a language they could understand. By 1741, Handel had endured the financial collapse of several opera companies. There were rumors that, after nearly thirty years, Handel was giving up and returning to Germany.

Occasionally, Handel did write dramatic works in English — called Oratorios — for the London audiences. Sometimes, they were even a financial success. Still, Handel resisted switching completely over to the English oratorio. Now, seeing Handel's financial distress, Charles Jennens — the man who assembled the texts for Handel's other oratorios — tried to get him to write another one:

"I hope I shall persuade him to set another Scripture collection I have made for him, and perform it for his own benefit in Passion Week. I hope he will lay out his whole genius and skill upon it, that the composition may excel all his former compositions, as the subject excels every other subject. The subject is *Messiah* ..."

Jennens' invitation arrived at the same time that Handel was invited to Dublin to present a series of concerts. Handel seized on the opportunity and spent three frenetic weeks in August of 1741 writing *Messiah*: "Whether I was in my body or out of my body as I wrote it I know not. - God knows." Without a narrative plot, cast of characters, and dramatic action so important in opera, what Handel ended up creating was something remarkable.

*Messiah* had its first performance in Dublin, Ireland, in 1742. Less than a year later, Handel presented it in London. During those first couple of years, people weren't as crazy about his *Messiah* as they are now. The idea of a sacred work presented as an "entertainment" in a secular opera theater was somewhat sacrilegious. When *Messiah* was used at a yearly fundraiser for charity, the public finally came to embrace it. The eventual success of *Messiah* secured Handel's financial well-being and fame. Evidently, that was not enough. When congratulated on the success of his "entertainment" Handel supposedly replied, "I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them better."

## Scripture passages in **PART I** of *Messiah* by George Frideric Handel

**Part 1 begins by focusing on prophetic portions of Scripture dealing with the coming of the promised Messiah.**

### **Comfort Ye (Recitative)**

*Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem; and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord: make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:1-3)*

### **Every valley shall be exalted (Air)**

*Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain. (Isaiah 40:4)*

### **And the Glory of the Lord (Chorus)**

*And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. (Isaiah 40:5)*

### **Thus saith the Lord (Recitative)**

*Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: Yet once a little while and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations; and the desire of all nations shall come. The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts. (Haggai 2:6-7)*

### **Who may abide the day of His coming? (Chorus)**

*Who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiners fire. And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. (Malachi 3:2-3)*

### **Behold a virgin shall conceive (Recitative)**

*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us. (Isaiah 7:14)*

*(Air - Chorus) O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain: O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold you God! Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. (Isaiah 40:9)*

### **The people that walked in darkness (Recitative)**

*For Behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall rise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee, and the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. (Isaiah 60:1-3)*

*(Air) The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. (Isaiah 9:2)*

**For unto us a Child is born** (Chorus)

For 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. (Isaiah 9:6)

**PASTORAL SYMPHONY** (Luke 2:8-11 & 13-14)

*There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*  
(Recitative)

*And lo! the angel of the Lord cam upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid.* (Recitative)

*And the angel said unto the, Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people; for unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.* (Recitative)

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying:* (Recitative)

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion shout** (Air)

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, thy King cometh unto thee! He is the righteous Saviour, and He shall speak peace unto the heathen.*  
(Zechariah 9:10)

**Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened** (Recitative)

*Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.* (Isaiah 35:5)

**He shall feed His flock like a shepherd** (Air)

*He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.* (Isaiah 40:11)

**Come unto Him, all ye that labour** (Air)

*Come unto Him, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Take His yoke upon you, and learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.* (Matthew 11:27-28)

**His yoke is easy and His burthen is light** (Chorus)

His yoke is easy and His burthen is light. (Matthew 11:29)

## Scripture passages in **PART II** of *Messiah* by George Frideric Handel

**Part II is about the accomplishment of redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus, mankind's rejection of God's offer, and mankind's utter defeat when trying to oppose the power of the Almighty**

### **Behold the Lamb of God** (Chorus)

*Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)*

### **He was despised** (Air)

*He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. (Isaiah 53:3)*

*He gave His back to the smiters, and His cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: He hid not His face from shame and spitting. (Isaiah 53:6)*

### **Surely, He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows** (Chorus)

*Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows! He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him. (Isaiah 53:4-5)*

### **And with His stripes we are healed** (Chorus)

*And with His stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)*

### **All we like sheep, have gone astray** (Chorus)

*All we, like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6)*

### **All they that see Him, laugh Him to scorn** (Accompagnato)

*All they that see Him laugh Him to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying: (Psalms 22:7)*

### **He trusted in God** (Chorus)

*He trusted in God that He would deliver Him; let Him deliver Him, if He delight in Him. (Psalms 22:8)*

### **Thy rebuke hath broken His heart** (Accompagnato)

*Thy rebuke hath broken His heart; He is full of heaviness. He looked for some to have pity on Him, but there was no man, neither found He any to comfort Him. (Psalms 69:20)*

### **Behold, and see if there be any sorrow** (Arioso)

*Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto His sorrow. (Lamentations 1:12)*

### **He was cut off out of the land of the living** (Accompagnato)

*He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgressions of Thy people was He stricken. (Isaiah 53:8)*

### **But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell** (Air)

*But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell; nor didst Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption. (Psalms 16:10)*

**Lift up your heads** (Chorus)

*Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory. (Psalms 24:7-10)*

**Unto which of the angels said He at any time** (Recitative)

*Unto which of the angels said He at any time: Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee? (Hebrews 1:5)*

**Let all the angels of God worship Him** (Chorus)

*Let all the angels of God worship Him. (Hebrews 1:6)*

**Thou art gone upon High** (Air)

*Thou art gone up on high; Thou hast led captivity captive, and received gifts for men; yea, even from Thine enemies, that the Lord God might dwell among them. (Psalms 68:18)*

**The Lord gave the word** (Chorus)

*The Lord gave the word; great was the company of the preachers. (Psalms 68:11)*

**How beautiful are the feet of them** (Air)

*How beautiful are the feet of them: that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things. (Romans 10:15)*

**Their sound is gone out into all lands** (Chorus)

*Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the world. (Romans 10:18/Psalms 19:4)*

**Why do the nations so furiously rage together** (Air)

*Why do the nations so furiously rage together, and why do the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against His Anointed. (Psalms 2:1-2)*

**Let us break their bonds asunder** (Chorus)

*Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yokes from us. (Psalms 2:3)*

**He that dwelleth in heaven** (Recitative)

*He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn; the Lord shall have them in derision. (Psalms 2:4)*

**Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron** (Air)

*Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. (Psalms 2:9)*

**Hallelujah** (Chorus)

*Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. (Revelation 19:6) The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 11:15) King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. (Revelation 19:16)  
Hallelujah!*

## Scripture passages in **PART III** of *Messiah* by George Frideric Handel

### **Part III is a Hymn of Thanksgiving for the final overthrow of Death and the Resurrection & Future Reign of Christ**

#### **I know that my Redeemer liveth** (Chorus)

*I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth.  
And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God. (Job 19:25-26) For  
now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep. (I Corinthians 15:20)*

#### **Since by man came death** (Chorus)

*Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam  
all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. (I Corinthians 15:21-22)*

#### **Behold, I tell you a mystery** (Accompagnato)

*Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment,  
the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. (I Corinthians 15:51-52)*

#### **The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised** (Air)

*The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be  
changed. (I Corinthians 15:52)*

#### **Then shall be brought to pass** (Recitative)

*Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory.  
(I Corinthians 15:54)*

#### **O death, where is thy sting?** (Duet)

*O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and  
the strength of sin is the law. (I Corinthians 15:55-56)*

#### **But thanks be to God** (Chorus)

*But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.  
(I Corinthians 15:57)*

#### **If God be for us, who can be against us** (Air)

*If God be for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31) Who shall lay anything to the  
charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that  
died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is at the right hand of God, who makes intercession  
for us. (Romans 8:33-34)*

#### **Worthy is the Lamb that was slain** (Chorus)

*Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive  
power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing  
and honour, glory and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb,  
forever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 5:12-13)*