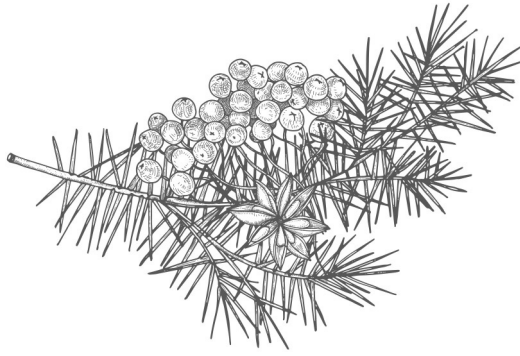


Hallelujah

JOURNEYING THROUGH ADVENT
WITH HANDEL'S MESSIAH

DAVE & SALLY GOBBETT

10 Publishing
a division of **10** of those.com



Preface

We have had a long and happy relationship with Handel's *Messiah*. Dave's parents used to play cassette tapes of it to send him to sleep as a child. It is the only piece of classical music he's ever bought on CD. And he writes his Sunday sermons most weeks with the *Messiah* playing in the background – so we're never surprised when George Frideric Handel ends up high on our Spotify most-played list each year. Sally has performed *Messiah* on a number of occasions, both as a soprano soloist and a chorus member. And we're pleased to say that the kids are beginning to catch the bug too!

Maybe you're already a convert, in which case you'll understand why Handel's *Messiah* is undoubtedly one of the most celebrated and beloved pieces of classical music in the English language. Handel composed the music for the oratorio

in a marathon twenty-four-day writing stint in 1741, barely leaving his study. Maybe you still need convincing. If the *Messiah* is new to you, or perhaps you wouldn't call yourself a classical music fan, then please stay with us. We very much hope to bring this magnificent music, and its marvellous message, to a wider audience.

Every Christmas (and Easter), millions of people around the world – both believers and unbelievers – treat themselves to performances of the *Messiah*. One glorious movement follows another: the evocative 'Comfort Ye My People'; the rousing 'For unto Us a Child Is Born'; the exultant 'Rejoice Greatly, O Daughter of Zion'; the urgent 'All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray'; the poignant 'He Trusted in God'; the victorious 'I know that My Redeemer Liveth'; not to mention the anthemic 'Hallelujah' chorus.

The genius and uniqueness of Handel's *Messiah* is that every single word is taken directly from the Bible. We have Handel's friend Charles Jennens to thank for that. He was the librettist. That is, he compiled the lyrics from the King James Version, two thirds of which come from the Old Testament. Together, Handel and Jennens have provided us with one of the earliest, and certainly most memorable, 'Bible overviews'. We'll trace through the theme of Messiah in three parts, which we're calling the Promise of the Messiah, the Passion of the Messiah and the People of the Messiah.

While the *Messiah* gives us rich biblical content, rarely do we take the opportunity to slow down and reflect on the meaning of each excerpt, mirrored in Handel's composition. This book is therefore made up of twenty-five devotions to be read during

Advent, plus a bonus introductory prelude for 30 November to whet your appetite, journeying through Handel's masterpiece. (There are actually over fifty movements in *Messiah*, so we've had to group some together and omit a few.) Each devotion includes the original biblical text Handel used, a brief meditation and a link to the music so you can listen along at home. Most days have between three and four minutes of music to listen to, though occasionally there are nearer ten minutes (and 'He Was Despised' is over eleven minutes on its own). While we pray that you'll benefit from simply reading the reflections, we believe that you'll get more from this devotion if you make the time to listen prayerfully to the pieces as well. We're convinced the fusion of music and meditation is extremely compelling. There is a QR code to the album we have used in preparing this book at the bottom of the Preface, performed by choral ensemble The Sixteen, which is available on Apple Music and Spotify.

If you'd like to think further about the history behind *Messiah*, we recommend looking at Charles King's *Every Valley: The Story of Handel's Messiah*. For a more in-depth look at the musicianship of the *Messiah* from a theological perspective, Lee Gatiss' beautifully presented edited work, *A Month with the Messiah: Reflections on Handel's Masterpiece*, is an excellent resource. It too has been designed to be used during Advent.

We would like to thank the many people who've made this short devotional possible: our loving parents, Geoff & Christine Gobbett and Nigel & Liz Jones, for exposing us to great music and great theology for as long as we can remember; our children, Ella-Beth, Owen, Barney & Noah for bearing with us and cheering us along the way; our friends at 10ofThose for bringing a vision to

reality; our brothers and sisters at Highfields Church for sharing our journey with our Messiah all year round; ministry friends, Elspeth Pitt, Andrew Sach and Garry Williams for clarifying a few points of theology; and others who've prayed for us along the way. We thank God for giving gifts to mankind in the creative genius of Charles Jennens and George Frideric Handel, and for the voices and music with which to praise him. Above all, we thank God for our crucified, risen, reigning and returning Lord Jesus, whose saving and sustaining grace we seek to proclaim. 'Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness' (Psalm 115:1).

As we journey together through Handel's *Messiah* this Advent, over the same length of time that it took Handel to write the whole piece, it's our hope and prayer that you'd be struck afresh by the Messiah himself, as we await his coming again. May we all find ourselves caught up in that chorus of celebration and hope that lasts forever: hallelujah!

Cardiff

Easter 2025



30 November: Introduction

Overture [3:09]

‘Are we nearly there yet?’ Our extended families live at opposite ends of the country. Christmas holidays always involve the twelve-hour round trip between Cardiff and Newcastle. One infamous year in the Gobbett family saw Dave preaching on Christmas Day morning before a six-hour drive to the north-east, with one of our sons longingly cradling his unopened box of technic Lego for the whole journey. Long car journeys are wonderful training grounds for teaching you how to wait!

Advent is a time of waiting. The word literally means, ‘coming’. As we wait the few short weeks for 25 December to arrive, and the children ask, ‘How many more sleeps till Christmas?’ we remember the long-awaited first coming of the Messiah. And we anticipate his long-awaited second coming. That first Christmas, believers had to wait hundreds of years for the birth of Jesus. We’re already in the thousands as we look to his return.

There are over three minutes of wordless music before the first lyrics are sung in *Messiah*. This wait is purposeful, and Handel’s musical choices are significant. Music has the power to touch the emotions, and Handel knew this. Mozart apparently said of him, ‘Handel understands effect better than any of us – when he chooses, he strikes like a thunderbolt.’ The musical style used here (‘French Overture’) was a typical two-part opening for Baroque stage music, popular in early-seventeenth-to-mid-eighteenth-century Europe. The first part features slow dotted rhythms (daaah da-daaah da-daaah da-daaah), characteristic of a

sombre royal procession. The second part is an energetic fugue in which a short musical phrase is taken up and interwoven by successive instruments (listen out for more fugues as *Messiah* unfolds). Handel is setting the stage for a drama – the arrival of a king. But hanging over the upbeat fugue, a minor key leaves the listener with a sense of foreboding.

For what or whom are you waiting in this Advent season? The music of Handel's first movement charges us with this serious question. Are you waiting for the grandchildren to arrive? Are you counting down the days till the end of the school term? Are you simply looking forward to the food, the time off work, the presents? Or are you longing to relive, with expectant Israel, the arrival of her King and Saviour? Are you seeking to have your emotions grasped afresh by the narrative of the suffering, yet triumphant, Servant? Are you serious about preparing your heart and those of the people around you for his glorious second advent?

For some of us, it's easy to forget our returning King. We live as if the overture were an end in itself. We get comfortable or consumed in the here and now – whether we're over the moon at possibilities or overwhelmed by pressures. For others, the King can't return soon enough. We experience brokenness in the world, heaviness in our hearts and darkness all around. And we desperately pray, 'Come Lord Jesus'. The wait is lonely, confusing and painful. Whichever camp you find yourself in this Advent, let's pray that we would lift our eyes and ears to the Messiah whose arrival and passion will change the world forever.



PART 1

THE
Promise
OF THE
Messiah

1 December

Tenor Solo [3:11] – Isaiah 40:1–3

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.

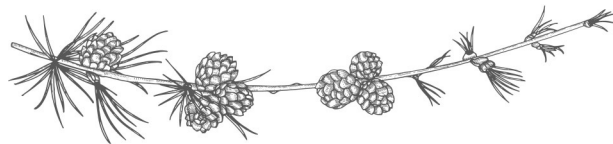
The very first words that break the silence come from a lonely tenor. ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God,’ he sings. Taken from Isaiah chapter 40, like several of the early pieces in *Messiah*, they parachute us into eighth-century BC turmoil. After years of spiritual compromise and divine warning, God’s people have been trafficked into exile over five hundred miles away from home. For these refugees in Babylon, Solomon’s temple is a distant memory. As are the sacrifices that took place there. As is the forgiveness that they secured. In their place it’s all warfare (the kjv’s way of referring to Israel’s national strife) and iniquity (referring to their spiritual bankruptcy).

No doubt internal voices of guilt and shame would have crowded in. Feelings of regret and loss, confusion and fear. Why have we brought this on ourselves? Is it the end of the road spiritually? Can anything be done about our plight? Has God forgotten us? Is there any way home to a land of spiritual vitality again? Of course, we live in a very different time and place, but some of these questions may have a contemporary ring about them – perhaps even a personal one.

For those with ears to hear, the promise of comfort is given, three times over. The tenor voice triple underlines that God has not forgotten his people. Their long and wearying era of strife and sin is finally over, soon to be firmly in the rearview mirror. And rather than forever rubbing their noses in the past, God is ready and willing to move on. To the future we go! This is comfort indeed.

As you look back on the last year, maybe you too have felt somewhat distant from God, if you're honest. Happier times of closeness to God and spiritual vitality seem a distant memory. Perhaps it's because of choices you've made, or the choices of those around you. Perhaps it's just the weariness of trying to live for God when everything around you urges the opposite.

But God doesn't want us languishing in spiritual exile. He loves his people too much to leave them struggling alone. Which is why, if you listen closely, you'll hear a 'voice ... that crieth in the wilderness; prepare ye the way of the Lord'. These words famously belong to John the Baptist and assure us that whoever we are, whatever we've done and however hard life has become, this Christmas our Lord is near. With the Messiah, help is never far away.



2 December

Tenor Aria [3:33] – Isaiah 40:4

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.

Several years ago, Barack Obama visited Cardiff. He stayed at Celtic Manor, the luxury hotel resort just outside Newport, which was the host venue for a NATO summit of world leaders. Years went into the planning. No expense was spared. The M4 motorway between Newport and Cardiff was temporarily reconfigured. The roads into Cardiff city centre had never looked better. There was not a pothole or roadwork in sight! Truly the rough places were made plain.

It's what happens when someone important is on the way. In today's meditation, Isaiah pictures creation getting ready for the arrival of the Lord. No expense is spared. Tectonic plates realign. Flawless tarmac rolls out as far as the eye can see. Nothing can delay or deter a God who is set on saving.

Maybe God feels far away right now. All you see are the hills and valleys in front of you, some of them as high as Mount Everest or as deep as the Grand Canyon. Hills of difficulty, valleys of despair. If there is a road between you and divine help, it feels crooked and rough and altogether treacherous and impassable. Can God really get past all the twisting and turning, the bumps and boulders, to reach us in our time of need?

He most certainly can. 'The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth' writes the psalmist

(Psalm 145:18, NIV). Any distance between us and God is our problem, not his. If God wants to get through to us, no puny mountain or gaping ravine will slow him down.

That means no regrets we may have about yesterday will hold him back. No burdens of today will throw him off. No anxiety about tomorrow will overwhelm him. If creation itself can be moulded like putty to clear the way for God to get through, then you can be certain divine aid is close at hand.

Handel captures such divine bulldozing brilliantly, with the tenor's aria recreating the Scripture musically. Why not listen again and observe that the melody goes up for the word 'exalted', down for the words 'made low', meanders up and down for the word 'crooked' and stays constant for the word 'plain'. Then marvel at what a privilege it is to have access to God on the open road.

