

To God Alone Be The Glory

Neal's Music Hall was designed to hold only 600 people. But over 700 had crowded in. The conductor raised his baton, and the audience came to quiet attention. They didn't want to miss a single note or syllable of the performance. They were not disappointed. After an overture that ran three and a half minutes, the clear voice of the tenor rang through the hall, intoning words that still touch hearts and lift spirits 278 years later.

That's how long it's been since Handel's *Messiah* was first performed in the music hall on Fishamble Street in Dublin, Ireland, on Tuesday, April 13, 1742. It's been thrilling audiences ever since. In fact, for many people attending a performance of Handel's *Messiah* (or breaking out their *Messiah* CD) is as much a part of Christmas as stringing up lights, decorating a tree, or exchanging presents. Handel considered *Messiah* a Lenten piece of music. That's why it was first performed at the end of Lent. But the first two sections have a distinct Advent and Christmas tone. What is Christmas without Good Friday and Easter? And what's Easter without Christmas?

How many modern Christmas songs will appeal to people 278 years from now? Irving Berlin wrote "White Christmas" in 1940, and it's still a favorite 80 years later. But would you plan your Christmas schedule around that song? Would you travel 60 miles to hear someone sing it in the Bing Crosby style? How about other "Christmas classics" such as "Rudolph the

Red-nosed Reindeer," "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus," and "All I Want for Christmas is You"? Will people even know about these songs 278 years from now, let alone listen to them?

If the world is still turning in 278 years, I suspect people will still be attending presentations of Handel's *Messiah*. The music stirs our emotions. And yet the greatness of *Messiah* is its message, which Handel drew directly from Holy Scripture, such as Isaiah's words: COMFORT MY PEOPLE, SAYS THE LORD!

If you're anything like me or God's people back then, you could use some comfort. God permitted Isaiah to look 100 years into the future of his people. It wasn't pleasant. God's people would be in captivity, living 700 miles away from their homeland. Imagine feeling cut off from the Lord, no hope.

That dark, doleful situation of Israel, Handel captures in the music of this section of *Messiah*. Listen to part of the introduction: [Play ~20 seconds of track 1.] Did you notice how slow and somber the music is? Almost like a funeral march. The music is trying to transport us across the desert into the gloom of exile. Israel is cut off from her homeland. The people are deprived of their once-favored status.

But Handel's music changes from slow and somber. When the tenor finally sings the first words of *Messiah* from our text in Isaiah, his words pierce the darkness like a light, breaking through the gloom of

despair. Listen to “Comfort ye my people” and be filled with hope. [Play ~35 seconds of track 2.]

Isn't that compelling? Handel has captured the tone of our sermon text. It's like learning that scientists just found a cure for your kind of cancer. Except that God's spokesman announces a message that wants to bring hope to all God's people of all time: “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*”

In English it sounds like this: [groan]. In Hebrew it sounds like this: “*Nahamu, nahamu ami.*” That's what you call onomatopoeia—the word sounds like what it is. The form the Lord uses here means “to speak comfort to those who are groaning, to bring words of assurance to those who are grieving over a loss.” That's what the Lord wants his people to hear. He understands what we are going through when sin ruins relationships or brings about the death of a loved one. God's not just going to sit there like a bump on a log. “Let them know that I'm going to act. *Comfort, comfort my people.*

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” Or if we translate more literally: “*Speak to the heart of Jerusalem.*” The Lord's message isn't just for your head but your heart too. Our gracious God isn't pronouncing judgment and condemnation here, although he has every right to. Instead the Lord is showing us his heart, like a parent who rushes to

comfort a toddler who just lost her balance and whacked her head on the coffee table.

Now imagine a parent who tries to comfort a child when the child has not just gotten hurt. The child is having a wonderful time playing and laughing. ?And the parent wants to stop play time to comfort the child? It doesn't make sense.

In the same way, if you're not bothered by any of your sins, you probably don't feel much need for comfort. So imagine that I come over to you right now and flick your ear, and punch your shoulder, and kick your shin, and step on your foot. How do you feel toward imaginary me? At the very least you are wondering why I'm assaulting you. And here's the reason. I want you to sense what the Lord must feel when we misuse his name with “O my God,” or when we try to solve our problems without praying to him for help. The Lord takes it as a personal slur when we impatiently raise our voice at someone rather than handle the situation with loving words. We might as well yell at God... except that some of us do, and we're so used to the disrespect all around us in our culture that we don't even flinch at how evil it is to disrespect God. This is one reason why he sends us trouble, or sends us into exile like he did Israel. We need to feel some of the consequences of our sins so we don't think they are little trifles. We need to sense sadness after twisting a relationship into an ugly pretzel.

Then the Lord can comfort, comfort us, his people. Then he can “*Proclaim to her, making it loud and clear, that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has*

been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."

Tell Israel that her *"hard service has been completed."* "Hard service" can also mean "war." "Her war has been completed." The war we declared on the Lord, which we could never win against him, has come to an end. God himself "finished" it. He did so by "paying for" our sin. It has been "paid in full," which means the same as what Jesus announced from the cross: "It is finished!" If that's not clear enough, the Lord says we have received *"double for all our sins."* The Lord has more than just paid for our sins. He has given us twice as much forgiveness as we needed. If you are a maturing Christian, you may be thinking about how big and wonderful God's forgiveness is. If you still have a lot of growing to do, you've probably tuned out or you're saying, "Pfh! God's forgiveness. No big deal. So I slip up sometimes. I've been under a lot of pressure lately. Sometimes I don't feel well, which excuses me. I just don't have time to do everything the Lord wants, like have some prayer- and reading-the-Bible time every day. It's just a little lapse. I'll get back to it."

How much more accurate to say, "I declared war on your truth, Lord. I perverted your ways. I despised your Word." Only when we see the seriousness of our sins do we find relief in God's comfort. Did you notice and were you comforted, for example, when the

Lord calls us, "my people"? By his grace we sinners are still his people! His message is from "your God." What love! Our hearts are so full that we've gotta respond.

But how? The Lord's messenger spells out a really good way to respond: build a road. "*A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.'*" Yep, build a road. The Lord is coming, like a king, to visit our town. And he wants us to know so we can get ready for his coming by building a road for his arrival. What kind of road? The Lord wants a straight and smooth road, one easy to travel when he comes to us. If there are valleys or low spots, they should be "exalted" or filled in. If there are hills or mountains in the way, they should be "made low" or leveled. And our king doesn't want to waste time on a curvy road either. Make him a straight and smooth road.

You realize, don't you, that the road the Lord is describing is not a road across the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem. It's the road into our hearts. What obstacles might the Lord find on the road to your heart? Is any arrogance obstructing it, like a mountain? Is there any sadness or worry that needs to be filled in like a valley? Are there any fun activities that might be sidetracking us for

so long that we aren't leaving enough time to feed our faith on God's Word? Do we really want to hang out a road sign that says, "Pardon my dust, Lord. I'm not ready for you yet"?

When Handel wrote the music for the words, *Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low*, he made it light and exuberant. Do you understand why? Because we believers feel excited and joyful that our Lord is coming. Listen for yourselves. [Play 40 seconds of track 3.]

Way to go, Handel! You've captured the point of this Advent season. Christmas is one of the happiest times of the year because we get to celebrate the Lord's coming to earth as a little Child so that he might serve as our Savior. Of course we want to fill in every valley and level every mountain! We want Jesus to have an easy trip to our hearts. How exciting to serve the Savior!

It's like how some of our fellow believers in Africa behave when it's time to gather the offering at church. The ushers don't come to them with a plate while they sit quietly in the pews, no. Each person goes up to the altar carrying their own offering. The musicians play a lively, happy song, and the people get up and sing and dance as they form a line and make their way to the front of the church, where they drop their offerings in a basket. They are so delighted with God's comfort in Jesus that they just have to

show their joy as they bring their gifts to the Lord. Their dance says symbolically, "This offering is more than money. My whole life belongs to my Lord." Let me know when you're ready to change our offering practice to theirs.

But even if we never dance during our offering here, there are other ways for us to show our excitement for forgiveness at offering time. How about regular offerings? When you miss a Sunday, bring a double offering next week. How about generous offerings? We Lake City residents have plenty enough that a generous percentage of income for Jesus doesn't hurt much, if at all. Did you know that it would take a gift to Jesus of only six dollars (at the least) out of every hundred that comes into our homes in order to cover our entire modest ministry? What about a special gift to the Lord? Wouldn't it be great to have better cameras for recording our worship videos? If video cameras don't excite you, there are other missions and special projects to fund. It's quite exciting to give back to the Lord for his many mercies. And think of all the other ways you can show your excitement about the Lord Jesus coming to us. How about if we all talk nice to others all the time? How about if we do something nice for someone who has done something mean to us? How about helping households who aren't making ends meet under this pandemic. This is how people act who love to hear the Lord say, "*Comfort, comfort my people.*"