MESSIAH DAILY DEVOTIONS

This daily guide for listening and reflection moves through Messiah chronologically, from start to finish, so you can infuse the entire Advent season with Scripture and music. Jennens and Handel drew on the King James Version translation of the Bible and on the Coverdale Psalter, the Psalms used in the Book of Common Prayer (those selections are included below, and are also available online); you may also want to consult a more modern translation, such as the New Revised Standard Version. Reading the translations side-by-side will help enrich your understanding and appreciation.

One other note: This daily guide includes 26 days of listening and reflection. Each year's Advent season is a slightly different number of days (2026 is 26 days; 2027 is 27 days, 2028 is 22 days, and so on), so adjust your progress accordingly.

PART I

SCENE 1
ISAIAH'S PROPHECY OF SALVATION

DAY ONE: November 29th

(1) Sinfony (Overture)

(2) Comfort ye my people (Isaiah 40:1-3)

King James Version (KJV): Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God: Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplish'd, 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

The overture begins simply, and then builds into a fugue – a taste of the swirling fugues to come. The oratorio's first words are Isaiah's tender words of comfort, envisioning a coming deliverance and the arrival of God among the people. Emmanuel is on the way!

DAY TWO: November 30th

(3) Ev'ry valley shall be exalted (Isaiah 40:4)

(4) And the glory of the Lord (Isaiah 40:5)

KJV: "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain. 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 40:4-5

The "way through the wilderness" evokes both (a) the exodus story, and (b) smoothing out a road for a royal procession. "And the glory of the Lord" is the choir's first entrance, a magisterial proclamation, with fugue-like elements creating a sense of immersive splendor.

SCENE 2
THE COMING ARRIVAL

DAY THREE: December 1st

(5) Thus saith the Lord of Hosts (Haggai 2:6-7; Malachi 3:1)

(6) But who may abide the day of His coming (Malachi 3:2)

(7) And he shall purify the sons of Levi (Malachi 3:3)

KJV: Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: Yet once a little while, and I will shake the heav'ns and the earth, the sea, and the dry land, all nations I'll shake; 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. But who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire. And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. + Haggai 2:6-7, Malachi 3:1-3

God's arrival is poetically framed not only as a New Exodus through the wilderness from captivity to freedom, but also as a time of accountability and change. Injustice shall be laid bare – but God comes not as a destroyer, but rather as a "refiner," a "washer," a "purifier."

SCENE 3
THE PROPHECY OF CHRIST'S BIRTH

DAY FOUR: December 2nd

(8) Behold, a virgin shall conceive (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23)

(9) O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion (Isaiah 40:9; Isaiah 60:1)

KJV: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, "God with us" … 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 your God! Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. + Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 40:9, 40:1

Isaiah envisions a pregnant "young woman"; Matthew (drawing on a Greek translation of Isaiah) refers to a "virgin." In both variations, Messiah's central theme is clear: God isn't distant, but rather is "God with us" – good news worth declaring from a high mountain!

DAY FIVE: December 3rd

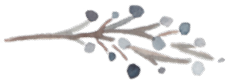
(10) For behold, darkness shall cover the earth (Isaiah 60:2–3)

(11) The people that walked in darkness (Isaiah 9:2)

(12) For unto us a child is born (Isaiah 9:6)

KJV: For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise 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… 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…. 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 Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace! + Isaiah 60:2-3; Isaiah 9:2, 9:6

More Isaiah (of Messiah*'s 81 verses, 21 are from Isaiah!): this divine child will be a "great light" scattering shadows of suffering, injustice, and iniquity, the "Wonderful Counselor," the "Mighty God," the "Prince of Peace" – God with us! As you listen, imagine "For unto us a child is born" resonating in London's Foundling Hospital Chapel…*



SCENE 4
THE ANNUNCIATION TO THE SHEPHERDS

DAY SIX: December 4th

(13) Pifa (Pastoral Symphony)

(14) (a) There were shepherds abiding in the fields (Luke 2:8)
(b) And lo, the angel of the Lord (Luke 2:9)

KJV: There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. + Luke 2:8-9

The "Pastoral Symphony" sets the stage, transporting us to the shepherds' fields; Handel called it "Pifa" after the pifferari, traditional Italian shepherd-bagpipers. An intimate soprano rises – the oratorio's first move into narrative (as opposed to the poetic visions of prophecy).

DAY SEVEN: December 5th

(15) And the angel said unto them (Luke 2:10-11)

(16) And suddenly there was with the angel (Luke 2:13)

(17) Glory to God in the highest (Luke 2:14)

KJV: And the angel said unto them: 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. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heav'nly host, praising God, and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will toward men." + Luke 2:10-14

The shepherds are afraid, and the angel's first words go right to the heart of the human condition: "Fear not! I bring you good tidings of great joy for all people!" The Messiah is born! The "Glory to God" chorus, with its sudden fugue-like swirl, fills the sky with the heavenly host!



SCENE 5
CHRIST'S HEALING AND REDEMPTION

DAY EIGHT: December 6th

(18) Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion (Zechariah 9:9–10)

(19) Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened (Isaiah 35:5–6)

KJV: Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, thy King com'th unto thee. He is the righteous Saviour, and He shall speak peace unto the heathen… Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart [a deer], and the tongue of the dumb shall sing. + Zechariah 9:9-10; Isaiah 35:5-6

The shepherds' joy swells into a call for all to "rejoice greatly." The Zechariah passage is the same one

referenced on Palm Sunday, where Jesus says "even the stones" would rejoice (Luke 19:40); likewise, in Isaiah's vision of healing and joy, even the speechless shout for joy!

DAY NINE: December 7th

(20) He shall feed his flock like a shepherd (Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 11:28–29)

(21) His yoke is easy (Matthew 11:30)

KJV: 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… Come unto Him, all ye that labour, come unto Him all ye that 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. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. + Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 11:28-30

To conclude Part I, Jennens and Handel turn to the heart of Jesus' ministry as "the Good Shepherd" who cares for the flock, and whose "yoke" is easy – meaning following Jesus is gracefully accessible to all, news the choir celebrates with joy upon joy upon joy.



PART II

SCENE 1
CHRIST'S PASSION

DAY TEN: December 8th

(22) Behold the Lamb of God (John 1:29)

KJV: Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. + John 1:29

As Part II begins, the contrast with the end of Part I mirrors the heart of the Gospel story: the Good Shepherd comes for the love of the world, but the world rejects him. And yet: "the lamb of God" is the One (as the Passover lamb story attests) who will protect and free the people.

DAY ELEVEN: December 9th

(23) He was despised and rejected of men (Isaiah 53:3; Isaiah 50:6)

KJV: He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief… 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 53:3, 50:6

The theme of the world's rejection of Jesus is developed here, in one of the oratorio's most famous solos – achingly tender, and drawing on the ancient, mysterious tradition of the "suffering servant," a "man of sorrows" through whom the salvation of all will arrive.

DAY TWELVE: December 10th

(24) Surely He hath borne our griefs (Isaiah 53:4–5)

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

KJV: 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. And with His stripes we are healed. + Isaiah 53:4-5

Continuing Isaiah's "suffering servant" theme, now in a more epic, dramatic style: the almost unfathomable mystery that the divine servant's suffering somehow absorbs the suffering of the world, bears the griefs of the world, and opens the way to healing and redemption.

DAY THIRTEEN: December 11th

(26) All we like sheep have gone astray (Isaiah 53:6)

(27) All they that see Him laugh Him to scorn (Psalm 22:7)

(28) He trusted in God that He would deliver Him (Psalm 22:8)

KJV and Coverdale Psalter (CP): All we, like sheep, have gone astray, we have turned ev'ry one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all… All they that see Him laugh Him to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying: He trusted in God that He would deliver Him; let Him deliver Him, if He delight in Him. + Isaiah 53:6; Psalm 22:7-8)

The sheep have gone astray, but the shepherd, protecting the sheep, will bear the brunt instead – including the scorn of mockery. Citing Psalm 22, Jennens evokes how Jesus is mocked, and also how he quotes that very psalm on the cross (Mark 15:34).

DAY FOURTEEN: December 12th

(29) Thy rebuke hath broken His heart (Psalm 69:20)

(30) Behold, and see if there be any sorrow (Lamentations 1:12)

CP and KJV: 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… Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto His sorrow. + Psalm 69:20; Lamentations 1:12

Concluding this scene on Christ's passion, Jennens emphasizes that Jesus' suffering wasn't only physical, but was also emotional and interpersonal: abandoned by his friends, by the crowds, and even (apparently) by God. A consummate, unfathomable sorrow.

SCENE 2
CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION

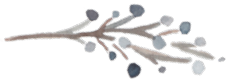
DAY FIFTEEN: December 13th

(31) He was cut off out of the land of the living (Isaiah 53:8)

(32) But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell (Psalm 16:10)

KJV and CP: He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of Thy people was He stricken… But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell; nor didst Thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption. + Isaiah 53:8; Psalm 16:10

Rejected by the world, the Messiah dies – but after he descends into death, God dramatically lifts him up into new life. The striking implication is clear: nowhere, not even the depths of hell, is out of the graceful reach of God's love and redemption.



SCENE 3
CHRIST'S ASCENSION

DAY SIXTEEN: December 14th

(33) Lift up your heads, O ye gates (Psalm 24:7–10)

CP: 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. + Psalm 24:7–10

A triumphant call to open the gates – the gates of Jerusalem, of heaven, of the reign of God – and let in "the King of Glory," the Messiah, the One who now ascends on high. Indeed, God is so much "God with us" that the divine itinerary covers it all: to hell and back and beyond!



SCENE 4
CHRIST'S RECEPTION IN HEAVEN

DAY SEVENTEEN: December 15th

(34) Unto which of the angels said He at any time (Hebrews 1:5)

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

KJV: Unto which of the angels said He at any time: "Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee?" Let all the angels of God worship Him. (Hebrews 1:5-6)

Christ enters heaven, and so do we, glimpsing the swirling, soaring, angelic worship of God. The author of Hebrews insists that Jesus is above any angel, and so worthy of their worship – and Handel transforms those verses themselves into a musical experience of that worship.



SCENE 5
THE BEGINNINGS OF GOSPEL PREACHING

DAY EIGHTEEN: December 16th

(36) Thou art gone up on high (Psalm 68:18)

(37) The Lord gave the word (Psalm 68:11)

CP: 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… The Lord gave the word; great was the company of the preachers. + Psalm 68:18, 11

In this new chapter of the drama, the Messiah's triumph becomes a movement, as the people spread the good news, one to another, one sermon at a time. Strikingly, these "gifts" are even for God's "enemies," for God wishes to "dwell among them," too – for the sake of salvation.

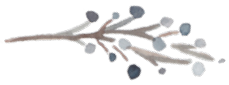
DAY NINETEEN: December 17th

(38) How beautiful are the feet of them (Isaiah 52:7; Romans 10:15)

(39) Their sound is gone out into all lands (Romans 10:18; Psalm 19:4)

KJV and CP: How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things. Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the world. + Romans 10:15, 18

The messengers are sent out ("apostle" means "one sent") with glad tidings, over the mountains and into the valleys – and when they're heard, the listeners "break forth into joy!" This preaching spreads far and wide, even "to the ends of the world."



SCENE 6
THE WORLD'S REJECTION OF THE GOSPEL

DAY TWENTY: December 18th

(40) Why do the nations so furiously rage together (Psalm 2:1–2)

(41) Let us break their bonds asunder (Psalm 2:3)

(42) He that dwelleth in heaven (Psalm 2:4)

CP: 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 His anointed: "Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yokes from us." He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn, the Lord shall have them in derision. + Psalm 2:1-4

But the world, by and large, does not receive the good news. Just as Jesus was rejected, so is the Gospel: the nations continue their vain corruption and conflict, war and cruelty, fury and contempt. God responds: these ways of sin shall not stand; their shackles must be broken!



SCENE 7
GOD'S ULTIMATE VICTORY

DAY TWENTY-ONE: December 19th

(43) Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron (Psalm 2:9)

(44) Hallelujah (Revelation 19:6; 11:15; 19:16)

CP and KJV: Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel… Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. The Kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever. King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah! + Psalm 2:9; Revelation 19:6, 11:5, 19:16

And that's exactly what God does, is doing, and will do in the end: the shackles of sin and captivity shall be "dashed in pieces like a potter's vessel." Think of the Statue of Liberty: Libertas steps forward, crushing the shackles of enslavement beneath her feet (if you're unfamiliar with that part of the statue, check it out!) – and to this great divine victory all creation cries, "Hallelujah!" No wonder this splendid chorus was used in Boston to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863!



PART III

SCENE 1
THE PROMISE OF ETERNAL LIFE

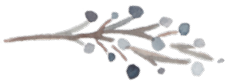
DAY TWENTY-TWO: December 20th

(45) I know that my Redeemer liveth (Job 19:25–26; 1 Corinthians 15:20)

(46) Since by man came death (1 Corinthians 15:21–22)

KJV: I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And tho' worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God… For now is Christ risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep. 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. + Job 19, 25-26, I Corinthians 15:20-22

Part III of the oratorio focuses on our participation in God's liberating new life and redemption. Each of us, no matter our struggles, can sing with Job that "my redeemer liveth!" And with Paul, we can take heart that just as in Adam "all die," so in Christ all shall be made alive.



SCENE 2
A MYSTERY

DAY TWENTY-THREE: December 21st

(47) Behold, I tell you a mystery (1 Corinthians 15:51–52)

(48) The trumpet shall sound (1 Corinthians 15:52–53)

KJV: Behold, I tell you a mystery: we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be chang'd, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be rais'd incorruptible, and we shall be chang'd. For this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality. + I Corinthians 15:51-53

Here Jennens and Handel turn to the great mystery of death and resurrection, declaring with Paul that, in the end ("at the last trumpet") we shall all be changed. Handel gives us the trumpets themselves, a kind of anticipatory, imaginative experience of the mystery.



SCENE 3
THE FINAL VICTORY

DAY TWENTY-FOUR: December 22nd

(49) Then shall be brought to pass (1 Corinthians 15:54)

(50) O death, where is thy sting? (1 Corinthians 15:55–56)

KJV: Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written; Death is swallow'd up in victory. 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 15:54-56

Continuing with the same poetic theme: at the end, somehow "death shall be swallowed up in victory." The death-dealing powers of the world can seem overpowering, but they are no match for the abiding power of God's love and new life. "O death, where is thy sting?"

DAY TWENTY-FIVE: December 23rd

(51) But thanks be to God (1 Corinthians 15:57)

(52) If God be for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31, 33–34)

KJV: But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ… If God be for us, who can be against us? 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. + I Corinthians 15:57; Romans 8:31, 8:33-34

For this good news, we can only give thanks to God: even when death-dealing powers seem to have the upper hand, love and life are with us, and shall prevail! Indeed, the good news of Christmas – that God is Emmanuel, "God with us" – is the Gospel's linchpin. Thanks be to God!

SCENE 4 December 24th
THE ACCLAMATION OF THE MESSIAH

DAY TWENTY-SIX:

(53) Worthy is the Lamb + Amen (Revelation 5:12–14)

KJV: 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 pow'r be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. + Revelation 5:9, 12-13

To express this thanks, Jennens and Handel create one last majestic chorus: a fugue drawn from the Book of Revelation, looping back to the image of the Passover lamb at the outset of the exodus journey from enslavement to freedom. With a single word – "Amen," which means "truly" or "so be it" – Handel concludes the oratorio with one last swirling, soaring fugue!

SDG

