

Handel's Messiah



Charles Jennens
by Thomas Hudson

Introduction

Charles Jennens (1700-1773) was a wealthy English landowner and friend of George Frideric Handel (1685-1759). A patron of the arts, and skilled in music, literature, and the Bible, he collaborated with Handel on some of his musical compositions. Jennens gave Handel the lyrics to the *Messiah*, verses primarily from Isaiah, Psalms, Paul's letters, and Revelation. *Messiah* tells the story of the advent of Christ, His victory over sin and death, His defeat of His enemies, victorious return, establishment of His kingdom on the earth, and the believer's victory over death through His resurrection.

A devout Christian, Jennens trusted the authority of the Scriptures and rejected Deist claims that God did not intervene in human history. The verses Jennens selected for Handel's *Messiah* reveal God's interest and involvement in man's affairs. Jennens wrote a friend concerning Handel:

"I hope he will lay out his whole Genius and Skill upon it,

that the Composition may excell all his former Compositions, as the Subject excells every other Subject. The Subject is Messiah."



Soli Deo Gloria at the end of Handel's signed MS.

Handel was overcome by the power of the verses he received from Jennens in August, 1741. Upon reading the words, the music began to dance and explode within him. He shut himself up and worked day and night, often forgetting to eat. After twenty-four days he finished the libretto and score. Handel closed his manuscript with the letters "SDG"—*Soli Deo Gloria*, "To God alone the glory".

Early Life

Handel was born in Halle, Germany in 1685, into a religious and affluent family. His father, Georg Händel, was a famous surgeon in northern Germany and wished his son to study law. An acquaintance of the family, the Duke of Weissenfels, heard the boy, then barely 11, playing the organ. The Duke recognized he was a musical prodigy and likely influenced his father to allow him to study music. By 18, Handel composed his first opera, *Almira*. During the next five years, he was employed as a musician, composer and conductor at courts and churches in Rome, Florence, Naples and Venice, and Germany, where the Elector of Hanover, the future King George I of

England, was briefly his patron. In 1710, Handel settled in London and became England's most popular and successful composer.

History of Performance

While today's performances of *Messiah* are usually during the Christmas season, *Messiah* was first performed in Dublin on April 13, 1742, as an Easter offering. Dublin was chosen as the place to introduce the work for several reasons. William Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, had invited Handel to present a series of charity concerts in Dublin "for the relief of the Prisoners in the several Gaols, and for the Support of Mercer's Hospital in Stephen Street, and of the Charitable Infirmary on the Inn's Quay." Handel had been disappointed by the reception of London audiences from the previous season. He thought it wise to introduce his work in Dublin and then bring it to London. Dublin was a prosperous and fast-growing city composed of wealthy citizens who had the sophistication and economic clout to support a major cultural event. *Messiah* was musically unorthodox in that it did not have a plot with the usual dramatic confrontations and strong narrative. Staging the performance was not without controversy. The Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dr. Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*) wrote:

“. . . whereas it hath been reported that I gave a licence to certain vicars to assist at a club of fiddlers in Fishamble Street, I do hereby annul and vacate the said licence, intreating my said Sub-Dean and chapter to punish such vicars as shall ever appear there, as songsters, fiddlers, pipers, trumpeters, drummers, drum-majors, or in any sonal quality, according to the flagitious aggravations of their respective disobedience, rebellion, perfidy and ingratitude.”

Despite such opposition, management of the Great Music Hall in Fishamble Street promoted the performance by asking ladies not

to wear hooped dresses to make room for more people. Apparently the appeal was effective: the audience was a record 700. The citizens were excited to hear a performance by the famous Handel; they may also have wished to see the contralto, Susannah Cibber, who was embroiled in a scandalous divorce.



Worthy is the Lamb

Despite the success in Dublin, controversies continued. One critic wrote, "An oratorio either is an act of religion or it is not; if it is, I ask if the playhouse is a fit temple to perform it in, or a company of players . . . fit ministers of God's Word?" Some clergy considered *Messiah* to be a blasphemous "religious farce" and it was not performed in a church until eighteen years after its composition. The first London performance of *Messiah* took place at the Covent Garden Theatre (now the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden) on 23 March, 1743, in the presence of King George II. When he heard the words, 'The kingdom of this world . . .' (*Hallelujah Chorus*) the King rose to his feet and remained standing until the end of the number. The king stood, most likely, to indicate he recognized Christ was King of Kings. When the king stood, everyone stood. The tradition of standing when the *Hallelujah Chorus* commences continues. Following this performance, Lord Kinnoul congratulated Handel on the excellent entertainment. Handel replied, "My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wished to make them

better.”

Handel was deeply concerned with the less fortunate throughout his life and participated regularly in charity benefits. He held annual benefit concerts for his favorite charity—London’s Foundling Hospital, a home for abandoned and orphaned children. These always included a performance of *Messiah*, indicating his love for the work. In 1759, when he was blind and in failing health, he insisted on attending an April 6 *Messiah* performance at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. A few days before he died, he stated he wished to die on Good Friday, “in the hopes of meeting his good God, his sweet Lord and Savior, on the day of his Resurrection.” He lived until Saturday morning, April 14, 1759, dying eight days after conducting the final performance of his great work. He had come full circle. *Messiah* was first performed during Eastertide and Handel died the day before Easter.



George Frideric Handel by
Balthasar Denner

Handel and his *magnum opus*’ reputation continued to grow after his death. Mozart paid Handel the supreme compliment when he rearranged *Messiah* in 1789. He confessed he was humbled by Handel’s genius and insisted alterations to Handel’s score should not be interpreted as an effort to improve the music. Mozart declared, “Handel knows better than any of us what will make an effect. When he chooses, he strikes like a thunderbolt.”

The Text of the Composition

Below is the text, supplied by Charles Jennens, of what many consider to be the greatest musical masterpiece every composed.

Part One

Part One focuses upon the birth and the coming of the Messiah in fulfillment of God's promises and the prophecies to establish His kingdom upon the earth. Before God establishes His kingdom on earth He will judge it in the Day of the Lord. In His righteous and peaceable kingdom Israel will find rest from its enemies and the nations will look to them for guidance.

1. Sinfonia (Overture)	
2. Tenor Recitative—Isaiah 40:1-3	Comment
<i>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.</i>	These verses speak of the “consolation of Israel” (Luke 2.25) to which Simeon and believing Israel looked. The “consolation” was the long-promised kingdom of God on earth, which the Messiah will establish.
3. Tenor Air—Isaiah 40:4	Comment
<i>Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.</i>	The Lord will level life's inequities and establish righteousness throughout His earthly kingdom (Matthew 6.10; Zechariah 14.9).
4. Chorus—Isaiah 40:5	Comment

<p><i>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.</i></p>	<p>When Christ returns, all will see Him for who He is—the glorious God of creation (Revelation 1.7).</p>
<p>5. Bass Recitative—Haggai 2:6-7; Malachi 3:1</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>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.</i></p>	<p>In accordance with His prophetic program, the Lord will pour out His wrath and judge the earth before He returns in the Day of the Lord (Zephaniah 1.14-18; Joel 2.30-32). His return will be swift (Matthew 24.44; Revelation 19).</p>
<p>6. Bass Air—Malachi 3:2</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>But who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire.</i></p>	<p>Few will survive the Day of the Lord, the day of God's wrath (Psalm 2.4-5, 9-12; Isaiah 24.6; Revelation 2-3).</p>
<p>7. Chorus—Malachi 3:3</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>And He shall purify the sons of Levi, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.</i></p>	<p>Israel's destiny is to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19.6; Isaiah 61.6; 1 Peter 2.9).</p>
<p>8. Alto Recitative—Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23</p>	<p>Comment</p>

<p><i>Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us.</i></p>	<p>The angel Gabriel confirmed Isaiah's virgin-born prophecy of the Messiah to Joseph and Mary (Luke 1.26-33; Matthew 1.18-25).</p>
<p>9. Alto Air and Chorus—Isaiah 40:9; Isaiah 60:1</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>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, and 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.</i></p>	<p>Israel's hope was the Messiah. He would fulfill God's promises and establish His kingdom on earth and Israel will become preeminent among the nations in this kingdom (Deuteronomy 28.1, 13).</p>
<p>10. Bass Recitative—Isaiah 60:2-3</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>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.</i></p>	<p>Spiritual darkness will reach its zenith on earth in the Antichrist's rule. When the Messiah, the true Light (John 1.9), comes, He will be Israel's glory to enlighten the nations.</p>
<p>11. Bass Air—Isaiah 9:2</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>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.</i></p>	<p>The Messiah will be Israel's light and Israel will serve as light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42.6, 49.6; Zechariah 8.23 cf. Isaiah 2.2-3).</p>

12. Chorus–Isaiah 9:6	Comment
<i>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.</i>	These titles apply to the Messiah in His first and second advents. He will rule as King over the nations of the earth in righteousness and peace (Zechariah 14.9).
13. Pifa (Pastoral Symphony)	
14. Soprano Recitative–Luke 2:8-9	Comment
There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks 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.	After 400 years of silence, God renewed communication to Israel with angels and through the Holy Spirit to Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, Simeon, and Anna (Matthew 1.20; Luke 1-2).
15. Soprano Recitative–Luke 2:10-11	Comment
<i>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.</i>	God communicated to shepherds that His Messiah had come to save His people and be a blessing to all.
16. Soprano Recitative–Luke 2:13	Comment
<i>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,</i>	Angelic host continually praise God for who He is and what He does (Job 38.4-7; Isaiah 6.1-3).
17. Chorus–Luke 2:14	Comment

<p><i>Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will toward men.</i></p>	<p>Angels eagerly desire to understand and watch God's plan unfold on the earth (1 Peter 1.12).</p>
<p>18. Soprano Air—Zechariah 9:9-10</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee. He is the righteous Savior. And he shall speak peace unto the heathen.</i></p>	<p>From the time of David, God revealed that the Messiah would come through the Davidic line to reign as King over Israel and the earth (2 Samuel 7.12-16).</p>
<p>19. Alto Recitative—Isaiah 35:5-6</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.</i></p>	<p>Jesus quoted this passage to John the Baptist's disciples to answer John's inquiry of whether Jesus was the promised Messiah (Matthew 11.2-6).</p>
<p>20. Alto Air—Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 11:28-29</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>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, that are heavy laden, and He shall 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.</i></p>	<p>The Jews were shepherds and God used this livelihood to describe His relationship with them. God referred to the nation as His sheep—especially believing Jews (Matthew 15.24; Mark 6.34; John 10.14). God does not call Gentiles or the Church "sheep."</p>
<p>21. Chorus—Matthew 11:30</p>	<p>Comment</p>

<i>His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.</i>	Those who trust the Messiah find peace and rest (Psalm 16.9; Romans 5.1).
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Part Two

Part Two's focus is upon the sufferings of the Messiah and His solving the problem of man's sin. It speaks of His victory over sin and the blessings that will come as a result of His establishing His kingdom on the earth.

22. Chorus—John 1:29	Comment
<i>Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.</i>	One of the few Old Testament, i.e., Gospel verses, that states Messiah will solve the sin problem.
23. Alto Air—Isaiah 53:3; Isaiah 50:6	Comment
<i>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.</i>	This prophecy of the Messiah was fulfilled by Jesus' torture and crucifixion (Matthew 26.67, 27.26, 30-31).
24. Chorus—Isaiah 53:4-5	Comment
<i>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.</i>	The Lord in His humanity identified with us and experienced sorrow, disappointment, and pain (Matthew 8.16-17). Through His sufferings we have peace with God (Romans 5.1).
25. Chorus—Isaiah 53:5	Comment

<i>And with His stripes we are healed.</i>	
26. Chorus–Isaiah 53:6	Comment
<i>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.</i>	This is the only passage in the Old Testament that provides insight as to how God would solve the problem of man's sin through the Messiah.
27. Tenor Recitative–Psalm 22:7	Comment
<i>All they that see Him laugh him to scorn: they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying:</i>	The prophecy of men cruelly mocking the Lord was fulfilled in Matthew 26.66-68; Luke 23.11, 35-39.
28. Chorus–Psalm 22:8	Comment
<i>He trusted in God that He would deliver Him: let Him deliver Him, if he delight in Him.</i>	Psalm 22 describes the torture Jesus suffered from men on the cross (Matthew 27.42-43).
29. Soprano Recitative–Psalm 69:20	Comment
<i>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.</i>	The disciples abandoned Him in His sorrow (Matthew 26.55-56). Even the Father and Holy Spirit abandoned Him on the cross (Matthew 27.46).
30. Soprano Air–Lamentations 1:12	Comment
<i>Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto His sorrow!</i>	The suffering (□□□□□□) of the Lord was physical, mental, and spiritual.
31. Tenor Recitative–Isaiah 53:8	Comment

<i>He was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgression of Thy people was He stricken.</i>	In the Old Testament, God only revealed that He would solve <i>Israel's</i> sin problem.
32. Tenor Air–Psalm 16:10	Comment
<i>But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell; nor didst Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption.</i>	David wrote this in anticipation of his and the Messiah's resurrection.
33. Chorus–Psalm 24:7-10	Comment
<i>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.</i>	Believing Israel longed for God to establish His kingdom on the earth. Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, and Anna looked forward to this time of blessing (Deuteronomy 28.1, 13; Luke 1-2).
34. Tenor Recitative–Hebrews 1:5	Comment
<i>For unto which of the angels said He at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?</i>	The day the Son was "begotten" was the day of His resurrection (Acts 13.33-34 cf. Psalm 2.7).
35. Chorus–Hebrews 1:6	Comment
<i>Let all the angels of God worship Him.</i>	Isaiah 45.23; Romans 14.11; Philippians 2.10
36. Bass Air–Psalm 68:18	Comment

<p><i>Thou art gone up on high, Thou hast led captivity captive, and received gifts for men; yea, even for Thine enemies, that the Lord God might dwell among them.</i></p>	<p>In His victory over sin, God the Son defeated the powers of darkness and secured victory for all who trust Him (Ephesians 4.8-10; Colossians 2.15).</p>
<p>37. Chorus–Psalm 68:11</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>The Lord gave the word: great was the company of the preachers.</i></p>	
<p>38. Duetto for 2 Alto Solos and Chorus–Isaiah 52:7, 9</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>How beautiful are the feet of him that bringeth glad tidings of salvation; that saith unto Sion, Thy God reigneth! Break forth into joy, glad tidings. Thy God reigneth!</i></p>	<p>This passage looks forward to God’s kingdom on earth (Zechariah 14.9) Paul quoted this passage in reference to Israel in Romans 10.15.</p>
<p>39. Chorus–Romans 10:18</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the world. [Not sung in the original performance.]</i></p>	<p>Paul quoted this in reference to Israel’s hearing the gospel.</p>
<p>40. Bass Air–Psalm 2:1-2</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p><i>Why do the nations so furiously rage together: why do the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsels together against the Lord and His anointed.</i></p>	<p>Psalm 2 outlines God’s prophetic program. Jew and Gentile are in rebellion against God. They crucified Him and will worship the Antichrist and oppose Christ in the Tribulation.</p>
<p>41. Chorus–Psalm 2:3</p>	<p>Comment</p>

<i>Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yokes from us.</i>	Mankind wishes to be free of God for God reminds us we are fallen creatures who need salvation.
42. Tenor Recitative–Psalm 2:4	Comment
<i>He that dwelleth in the heavens shall laugh them to scorn; the Lord shall have them in derision.</i>	God's response to man's rebellion against Him is mocking disdain.
43. Tenor Air–Psalm 2:9	Comment
<i>Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.</i>	God will crush man's rebellion and his empires (Daniel 2.44-45).
44. Chorus–Revelation 19:6, 11:15, 19:16	Comment
<i>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 for ever and ever. King of kings, Lord of lords.</i>	Following His victory at Armageddon, God the Father will give the Son the world to rule (Psalm 2.8).

Part Three

Part Three proclaims the Messiah's victory over sin and death and the believer's hope of resurrection and eternal life in Him. God revealed bodily resurrection as early as Job and His disclosure culminated in Paul's teachings. The Pharisees of Jesus' day believed in resurrection but the Saducees did not (Matthew 22.23; Acts 23.8). Jesus taught resurrection in His earthly ministry and proved it by His own resurrection. To Paul, the ascended, glorified Christ revealed the doctrine of resurrection of the Church, the body of Christ. All who have died in Christ since Paul's commission as apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13) God will raise when He returns in the air for His Church (1 Thessalonians 4.13-14). One generation

of Christians will not experience death. God will transform their earthly bodies directly into heavenly, eternal bodies (1 Thessalonians 4.15-18; 1 Corinthians 15.51-52). We call this the Rapture. Our victory over sin and death was won by the Lord Jesus Christ in His glorious resurrection.

45. Soprano Air—Job 19:25-26; 1 Corinthians 15:20	Comment
<i>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. For now is Christ risen from the dead, the firstfruits of them that sleep.</i>	This is the first statement in the Scriptures of the hope of resurrection. Jews had no concept of dying and going to heaven. Their hope was of resurrection and life on earth.
46. Chorus—1 Corinthians 15:21-22	Comment
<i>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>	Paul taught more about resurrection than all authors combined. Resurrection is the great hope of all believers.
47. Bass Recitative—1 Corinthians 15:51-52	Comment
<i>Behold, I tell you a secret: We shall not all sleep; but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.</i>	To Paul alone the risen Christ revealed the secret (μυστήριον) of the resurrection of the Church in which some will not experience death.
48. Bass Air—1 Corinthians 15:52-53	Comment

<i>The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.</i>	The order of the resurrection of the Church is the dead in Christ will be raised first and then those who are alive will be transformed (1 Thessalonians 4.16-17).
49. Alto Air–1 Corinthians 15:54b	Comment
<i>Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory."</i>	Paul quoted Isaiah 25.8 in this statement.
50. Duetto for Alto and Tenor–1 Corinthians 15:55-56	Comment
<i>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>	Sin and death, which began with the first Adam was defeated by the second Adam.
51. Chorus–1 Corinthians 15:57	Comment
<i>But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.</i>	Those who trust Christ share in His victory (Romans 6.4-5; Colossians 2.10-14).
52. Alto Air–Romans 8:31, 33-34	Comment
<i>If God be for us, who can be against us? Who shall lay any thing 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>	Christ's victory over sin was total. As a result, He has forgiven us all our sins (Ephesians 1.7, 4.32; Colossians 2.13). We do not ask God for forgiveness. He has forgiven!
53. Chorus–Revelation 5:12-13	Comment

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 to be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Lord Jesus Christ, the Name above all names, the King of Kings and LORD of Lords is worthy to receive all worship and glory.

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