

## December 7: The Hallelujah Chorus (from Handel's "Messiah")



**Pray:** *Lord, God Omnipotent, we welcome your reign. Thank you for sending Jesus your Son to secure your reign and to further your will being done on earth as it is in heaven. By the power of your Spirit, we ask you to make us more and more in the image of your Son to be agents of your Spirit for the furtherance of your Kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

**Read:** Revelation 19:1-9

"The Hallelujah Chorus" is the closing anthem of part 2 of a 3-part oratorio; viz. "The Messiah," an operatic presentation of the birth, life & death, triumphant resurrection and reign of Christ the King.

It was written in 1742 during a volatile political time – the time period between the English Civil War and the American Revolution. It was written at a time when public religiosity was both discouraged and viewed with suspicion; in fact, Handel had the piece advertised as "The New Sacred Oratorio" before its debut performance in London, in an effort to deflect opposition before it had a chance to be heard. Part of the reason the piece is so famous today is because it successfully managed to make it "past watching dragons" (to borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis). And when "the Hallelujah chorus" began, with its triumphant proclamation of the reign of Christ inaugurated by His resurrection and ascension, accompanied by trumpets, rousing choir conveying the worship of the angelic throng around the throne – "Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth – and He shall reign forever and ever! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" (direct from Revelation 19:6) – even King George II himself is reputed to have been unable to keep his seat and rose to his feet, with the entire Covent Garden theatre audience, of course, following his lead. It has been customary for the audience to rise at the singing of "the Hallelujah chorus" ever since.

That's the history – but now a couple of clarifications. "The Hallelujah Chorus" is played today during the Christmas season as a Christmas anthem; but it was not written as a Christmas anthem at all. "The Messiah" begins with the birth narrative of Jesus (of course), but "the Hallelujah chorus" is at the end of *part 2*, celebrating the resurrection, ascension, and reign (not the birth) of Messiah. "The Messiah" wasn't even written at, or performed at, Christmas. It was written in the summer and performed the following April. Nor is it entirely clear that King George was even in attendance at the London performance; much less that he stood. Critics of the story say this was a legend circulated thirty years later, just before Handel's death.

And yet . . . it is performed today at Christmas; and people stand for it, as Messiah King Jesus Christ is worshiped, His reign – forever! and ever! – proclaimed and celebrated, even in such secular forums as the public high school I attended in Souderton, PA, where traditionally alumni of the choir are invited to come and join the high school chorus to perform the traditional, closing anthem, as the audience stands. "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth! And He shall reign forever and ever! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

At a time when public religiosity is scorned; when public school musical performances all too often – scrubbed of religious content – are reduced to "inane celebrating of celebrating" (as *National Review* once tartly put it), "the Hallelujah Chorus" still travels past watchful dragons, and, even if out of lips, perhaps, that know not what they say to ears that know not what they hear, nevertheless . . . Christ is exalted. Better than the rocks crying out, I suppose, eh?

And that is why this "non-Christmas anthem" steeped in some political controversy, historical questions and suspicions is my favorite "Christmas song."



-- R. Todd Mangum