

“Herr Jesu Christ, wahr Mensch und Gott” BWV 127

1. Herr Jesu Christ, wahr Mensch und Gott,
Der du littst Marter, Angst und Spott,
Für mich am Kreuz auch endlich starbst
Und mir deins Vaters Huld erwarbst,
Ich bitt durchs bittere Leiden dein:
Du wollst mir Sünder gnädig sein.¹

2. Wenn alles sich zur letzten Zeit entsetzet,
Und wenn ein kalter Todesschweiss
Die schon erstarrten Glieder netzet,
Wenn meine Zunge nichts als nur durch Seufzer
spricht
Und dieses Herze bricht:
Genug, dass da der Glaube weiss,
Dass Jesus bei mir steht,
Der mit Geduld zu seinem Leiden geht
Und diesen schweren Weg auch mich geleitet
Und mir die Ruhe zubereitet.

1. Lord Jesus Christ, true human and God,
You who suffered torment, anguish, and mockery,
Who ultimately also died for me on the cross
And purchased² for me your father's favor,
I ask through your bitter suffering:
May it be your will to be gracious to me [the]³ sinner.

2. When in the last throes everything grows desperate,
And when a cold death-sweat
Drenches the limbs already paralyzed [with fear],
When my tongue speaks nothing but through sighs alone
And this heart breaks:
[It is] enough that faith then knows
That Jesus helps me⁴—
[Jesus] who goes with patience to his suffering,
And also guides me along this difficult path,
And prepares for me the [state of celestial]⁵ rest.

GENERAL NOTE: The text of this cantata presents the first and last stanzas of a hymn intact as the first and last movements of the cantata; the inner movements quote or paraphrase the inner stanzas.

¹This hymn stanza is a German paraphrase of the opening lines of the “Agnus Dei” from the Ordinary of the Latin Mass: “Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis” (“Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us”), which had been rendered by Luther into German as “Christe, du Lamm Gottes, der du trägst die Sünd der Welt, erbarm dich unser” (“Christ, you lamb of God, you who bear the sin of the world, have mercy on us”). In recognition of this, Bach incorporated into the instrumental counterpoint of this cantata movement a slow-motion quotation of the melody of the tune that the German Agnus Dei was traditionally sung to.

²The sense of this line is partly derived from Acts 20:28, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “habt nun acht ... zu weiden die Gemeine Gottes, welche er durch sein eigen Blut erworben hat” (“Now take heed ... to feed the congregation/community [or, ‘church’] of God, which he [Jesus] has purchased through his own blood [in dying sacrificially on the cross]”). The notion of Jesus' having “purchased” God's community out of being enslaved to sin, as opposed to simply having “obtained” it, reflects the premodern belief that, as a matter of lawfulness and justice, freedom from slavery is something that must be “paid” for. Thus, e.g., the Olearius Bible (which Bach owned), in its Lutheran commentary on this verse, explains that “ist demnach die Gemeine des HERREN sein teuer erkaufte Gut und Eigentum” (“the congregation of the LORD is, according to this, his dearly-bought good and possession”), echoing 1 Corinthians 6:20, “ihr seid teuer erkaufte” (“you [followers of Christ] are dearly-bought [with Christ's sacrificial blood as a ransom paid to God's justice for your sin]”).

³The language of this line is derived from Luke 18:13, “Gott sei mir Sünder gnädig” (hyperliterally, “God, be to me, sinner, gracious”). The original Greek of Luke's phrase ends “me *the* sinner” (“moi *to* hamartolo”), not “me, *a* sinner.”

⁴The sense of this line is derived from Luther's rendering of Psalm 54:4, “Gott steht mir bei; der HERR erhält meine Seele” (“God assists/helps me; the LORD upholds my soul”), where the Hebrew “azar” (“to help/succor”) is rendered with “beistehen” (“to assist/help”).

⁵For this sense, see e.g. Hebrews 4:8, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “so Josua sie hätte zur Ruhe bracht, würde er nicht hernach von einem andern Tage gesagt haben” (“if Joshua had brought them [the Israelites] to rest, then he [God] would not have spoken afterward of ‘another day’”). Lutheran interpretation understood “zur Ruhe” here as “zur ewigen/himmlischen Ruhe” (“to eternal/celestial rest”).

3. Die Seele ruht in Jesu Händen,
Wenn Erde diesen Leib bedeckt.
Ach ruft mich bald, ihr Sterbeglocken,
Ich bin zum Sterben unerschrocken,
Weil mich mein Jesus wieder weckt.

3. [In the “sleep of death,”]⁶ the soul will rest in Jesus’
[eternal] hands,⁷
When earth covers this [natural] body.⁸
Ah, summon me soon, you death bells;⁹
I am unafraid of dying,
Because [at the end time] my Jesus will resurrect me [in a
spiritual body].¹⁰

4. Wenn einstens die Posaunen schallen,
Und wenn der Bau der Welt
Nebst denen Himmelsfesten

4. When one day¹¹ the [end-time] trumpets sound,¹²
And when the edifice of the world,¹³

⁶With regard to the “sleep of death,” see fn. 8, below.

⁷Bach’s composing score reads “Die Seele ruht in Jesu Wunden” (“The soul rests in Jesus’ wounds”); but his original performing part, copied by an assistant, reads “Die Seele ruht in Jesu Händen” (“The soul rests in Jesus’ hands”), with no signs of its being a revision, and “hands” is the word used in the inner stanza of the hymn that is being paraphrased here. “Wounds,” in this context perhaps a somewhat stranger reading than “hands,” would also make sense, however, as the wound-cavity in Jesus’ rib (as narrated in John 19:34) was embraced in the Lutheranism of Bach’s day as a metaphorical place of refuge for Christian believers; consider, e.g., a chorale stanza in the Wagner Hymnal, owned by Bach, which reads: “Jesu, ... / Deiner Wunden Höhle / Ist mein Aufenthalt / ... [Ich] finde Ruh / In der offenen Seiten Ritze / Da ich sicher sitze” (“Jesus, ... your wound-cavity is my abode ... I find rest/peace in the opened side’s cleft, where I sit securely”).

⁸That is (in Lutheran teaching), on earth the human body is animated by the soul; but at death “this body” is separated from the soul, and believers are said to be in their “Todesschlaf” (the “sleep of death”) while their earthly bodies decay and their souls, now in some sort of intermediate state of proleptic blessedness, await the end time of the world; and at the end time, the believer’s body is resurrected—“plötzlich in einem Augenblick” (“suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye”), according to 1 Corinthians 15:52 in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day—as a transformed, heavenly “spiritual body” that is joined eternally to the soul, in which state, after the final judgment, the person, animated by God’s spirit, enjoys the full blessedness of heaven, eternally. In 1 Corinthians 15:44 the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day speak of “ein natürlicher Leib” (“a natural [earthly] body”) versus “ein geistlicher Leib” (“a [resurrected] spiritual body”).

⁹“Sterbeglocken” (“death bells”) could be rung to warn of an impending death, to announce a death, or to mark at one’s funeral the death of that person. These cantata lines are in a sense poetically conflating these uses, by summoning to one’s own funeral a person who is still in the last throes. In Lutheran teaching, to be in one’s final throes was an especially dangerous time, as people in this condition were more likely to find themselves plagued by what Lutheran doctrine took to be eternally-damning religious doubt.

¹⁰With regard to a “spiritual body,” see fn. 8, above.

¹¹“Einstens” (“one day,” or “some day”) is an extended version of the word “einst” (see line 6 of this movement), with no difference in meaning.

¹²Though the “trumpet”-noun given here is plural, biblically alert readers of these lines would expect the sound of only a single trumpet at a time, not of a brass ensemble. This cantata movement brings together two musical-instrument passages in the New Testament, the one with “trumpet” and the other with “seven [successive] trumpets.” The first, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, speaks of a “last trumpet” that “will sound” at the end time: “wir werden aber alle verwandelt werden; und dasselbige plötzlich in einem Augenblick, zur Zeit der letzten Posaune; denn es wird die Posaune schallen” (“but we shall all be transformed, and the selfsame suddenly, in an instant, at the time of the last trumpet [literally, “trombone”]; for the trumpet will sound”). The second, Revelation 8:2-11:19, speaks of “seven trumpets” that “are given to seven angels” who, one after another, each of them introduced performing his own trumpet blast, will reveal the judgment of the world at the end time, accompanied by great violence.

¹³“Bau der Welt,” “Weltbau,” and “Weltgebäude” were interchangeable expressions in seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century German, referring to the world as a metaphorical edifice or building, especially as reflected upon theologically. A famous usage was the Lutheran hymn “Du, o schönes Weltgebäude” (“You, O [physically] Beautiful [but spiritually hollow] Edifice of the World”); a stanza of this hymn is set in Bach’s Cantata 56.

Zerschmettert wird zerfallen,
 So *denke mein, mein Gott, im besten*;
 Wenn sich dein Knecht einst vors Gerichte stellt,
 Da die Gedanken sich verklagen,
 So wollest du allein,
 O Jesu, mein Fürsprecher sein
 Und meiner Seele tröstlich sagen:
Fürwahr, fürwahr, euch sage ich:
 Wenn Himmel und Erde im Feuer vergehen,
 So soll doch ein Gläubiger ewig bestehen.
**Er wird nicht kommen ins Gericht
 Und den Tod ewig schmecken nicht.**
 Nur halte dich,
 Mein Kind, an mich:
 Ich breche mit starker und helfender Hand

Along with those vaults of the skies,¹⁴
 Will fall into ruin, dashed to pieces,¹⁵
 Then *think of me* [your servant], *my God, for the best*;¹⁶
 When your servant one day appears¹⁷ for the [last]
 judgment,¹⁸
 Where thoughts bring accusation against themselves,¹⁹
 Then may it be your will, however,
 O Jesus, to be my advocate
 And say consolingly to my soul:
In truth, in truth, I say to you:²⁰
 When skies²¹ and earth pass away in the fire [on judgment
 day],²²
 Then a believer shall, nevertheless, abide eternally.
**He will not come into the [damning] judgment [of God]
 And he will not eternally taste death.**²³

¹⁴“Himmelsfeste” (normally employed in the singular, “Himmelsfeste”; but here in the plural, “Himmelsfesten,” mostly or only, it would seem, to accommodate a rhyme with “Gott, im besten”) is the German equivalent of the “palatium stellarum fixarum,” the arch or vault of heaven overhead, in which the clouds and the stars appear; this was rendered by Luther in the creation narratives in the book of Genesis as “Veste [i.e., Feste] des Himmels” (usually rendered in English as “firmament”). The one vault of the visible skies was sometimes, however, spoken of as two firmaments, namely the “day firmament” (illuminated by the sun) and the “night firmament” (illuminated by the stars).

¹⁵That is, according to 2 Peter 3:10-12, when Jesus will come back to earth and it will be destroyed.

¹⁶A poetically clipped quotation of Luther’s rendering of Nehemiah 13:31, “Gedenke meiner, mein Gott, im besten” (“Think of me, my God, for the best”). This was a well-known “Spruch” (“[biblical] saying”) that closes book of Nehemiah.

¹⁷“Sich stellen” is here being used, conventionally, in place of “sich einstellen” (“to appear”), a synonym for “sich zeigen” (“to present oneself”).

¹⁸This line draws on the language of Psalm 143:2, “Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht mit deinem Knecht; denn vor dir ist kein Lebendiger gerecht” (“Lord, do not enter into judgment with [me] your servant; for before you no living person is righteous”). The opening chorus of Bach’s Cantata 105 is a setting of this text, but the word “ist” (“is”) is changed there to “wird” (“will be”); its use of the future tense points to the Christian belief in a “last judgment”—the most common English term for what Luther calls “das Jüngste Gericht” (literally, “the youngest [i.e., ‘latest,’ in the sense of ‘that which will have been the most recently introduced’] court”)—at the end time.

¹⁹As is explained, using some of this same wording, in Romans 2:15-16.

²⁰See fn. 23, below.

²¹The two “heavens” or “skies” that were understood as passing away were “der Lufthimmel” (“the aerial sky”; i.e., the vaulted sky or the atmosphere, what in modern German is called “der Dunstkreis”) and “der Sternhimmel,” (“the starry sky”; defined in the leading eighteenth-century German dictionary as “der unermessliche Raum ausser der Erde, in welchem sich die Sterne befinden; zum Unterschiede von dem Lufthimmel und dem Himmel der Seligen” [“the immense space outside of the earth, in which the stars are located; in distinction to ‘the aerial sky’ and the sky/‘heaven’ (the place that is the final abode) of the (persons who are) blessed (with eternal salvation)’”]).

²²That heaven and earth will pass away is proclaimed in Mark 13:31; that this will happen with fire on judgment day is proclaimed in 2 Peter 3:7.

²³These three lines of hymn text are a variation on Luther’s renderings of John 5:24, “Wahrlich, wahrlich, ich sage euch: Wer mein Wort höret und gläubet dem, der mich gesandt hat, der hat das ewige Leben, und kommt nicht in das Gericht” (“Truly, truly, I say to you: Whoever hears my word and believes him [God my father] who has sent me, he [that believer] has eternal life, and comes not into the [damning] judgment [of God]”), and of the two “truly, I say to you” statements in John 8:51-52, “Wahrlich, wahrlich ich sage euch: So jemand mein Wort wird halten, der wird den Tod nicht sehen ewiglich;

Des Todes gewaltig geschlossenes Band.

Just cleave yourself,
My child, to me:
I will break, with mighty and saving²⁴ hand,²⁵
Death's powerfully tautened bond.²⁶

**5. Ach, Herr, vergib all unsre Schuld,
Hilf, dass wir warten mit Geduld,
Bis unser Stündlein kömmt herbei,
Auch unser Glaub stets wacker sei,
Dein'm Wort zu trauen festiglich,
Bis wir einschlafen seliglich.**

**5. Ah, Lord, forgive all our transgression;²⁷
Help [us] that we may wait with patience
Until our hour of death²⁸ draws near;
Also [help us that] our faith be ever vigilant,²⁹
Trusting your word steadfastly,³⁰
Until we fall asleep [at death]³¹ blessedly [with eternal
salvation].**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)

... Wahrlich, wahrlich ich sage euch: So jemand mein Wort hält, der wird den Tod nicht schmecken ewiglich" ("Truly, truly, I say to you: If anyone will keep my word [i.e., the 'word of the gospel,' Acts 15:7], he will not see death eternally; ... ['the Jews' then quote Jesus as having said:] truly, truly, I say to you: If anyone keeps my word, he will not taste death eternally").

²⁴"Helfen" in German-Lutheran language can mean "to help" or "to save [i.e., to bring eternal salvation from hell in this life and the next]," or both.

²⁵The sentiments of these last two lines are presumably based on Luther's renderings of Isaiah 59:1, "Siehe, des HERRN Hand ist nicht zu kurz, dass er nicht helfen könne" ("Look, the [power of the] hand of the LORD is not too short [for it to be the case] that he may not be able to help/save [us]"), and Psalm 20:7, "seine rechte Hand hilft gewaltiglich" ("his [the LORD our God's] right hand saves powerfully").

²⁶The expression "des Todes Bande" comes from Luther's rendering of Psalm 18:5, "Es umfingen mich des Todes Bande" ("the bonds of [the figure of] death beset me"); in Psalm 116:3 the Luther Bibles read "Stricke des Todes hatten mich umfängen" ("the cords [of the snare] of [the figure of] death had beset me"). In older German poetry, the expression "Todes Band"—i.e., in the singular—is often employed to accommodate rhymes with "Hand" ("hand"), "bekannt" ("known"), "Verstand" ("understanding"), and so on.

²⁷This is quoting the version of "the Lord's Prayer" in Matthew 6:12, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "vergib uns unser Schuld, wie wir vergeben unsern Schuldigern" ("[God, our father,] forgive us our debt/transgression, as we forgive our debtors/transgressors"). The version, however, in the Gospel of Luke reads, in 11:4 (in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day), "vergib uns unsre Sünden, denn auch wir vergeben allen, die uns schuldig sind" ("forgive us our sins, for also/even we forgive all who are indebted to [or, 'delinquent toward'] us"). Lutheran interpretation of the Lord's Prayer harmonized the two passages by understanding "Schuld" in Matthew 6:12 not in its primary sense of "debt" (Matthew's Greek, "opheilemata" ["debts"]) but in its less frequent sense as a synonym for "Sünde" ("sin"; Luke's Greek in 11:4, "hamartias" ["sins"]).

²⁸The word "Stündlein" (i.e., the diminutive of "Stunde" ["hour"]) was very often used in older German as a synonym for "Todestunde" ("hour of death"). It is used this way, e.g., in Sirach 11:19, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Er weiss nicht, dass sein Stündlein so nahe ist, und muss alles andern lassen, und sterben" ("He [who sets out to enjoy his old age after retiring from his life's work] does not know that his hour of death is so near, and [that he] must leave all [the things that he has acquired] to others, and [must] die").

²⁹"Wacker" (in later German usage, "valiant," "brave") had a wide variety of meanings in older German. It is apparently being employed here in one of its biblical senses, as a synonym for "wachsam" ("alert," "watchful," "vigilant"). The key passage for this hymn line is Luke 21:36, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "seid nun wacker allezeit, und betet, dass ihr würdig werden möget, ... zu stehen für des Menschen Sohn" ("be vigilant now at all times, and pray that you may be worthy ... to stand before [Jesus] the Son of Man [at the last judgment]").

³⁰"Festiglich," in its religious usage, was an old-fashioned word for "unerschütterlich, ohne Zweifel" ("steadfastly, without [being plagued by] doubt").

³¹On "sleep" as a metaphor for the state that the body is in after death but before resurrection, see fn. 8, above.



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