

“Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich” BWV 150

1. Sinfonia

2. *Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich. Mein Gott, ich hoffe auf dich. Lass mich nicht zuschanden werden, dass sich meine Feinde nicht freuen über mich.*<sup>1</sup>

3. Doch bin und bleibe ich vergnügt,  
Obgleich hier zeitlich toben<sup>4</sup>  
Kreuz, Sturm und andre Proben,  
Tod, Höll und was sich fügt.  
Ob Unfall schlägt den treuen Knecht,  
Recht ist und bleibet ewig Recht.

1. Sinfonia

2. *Lord, I long after you. My God, I hope in you.*<sup>2</sup> *Let me not be put to shame, lest*<sup>3</sup> *my enemies rejoice over me.*

3. Yet I am and remain content,  
Even though here in the present life<sup>5</sup>  
Cross-bearing,<sup>6</sup> attack, and other trials rage,  
[As do] death, hell, and what comes along with them.  
Though disaster strikes the faithful servant [of God],<sup>7</sup>  
[God’s essentially benevolent] justice is, and remains eternally,  
justice.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Psalm 25:1-2.

<sup>2</sup>Some translators simply offer a standard English Bible’s wording here, such as “Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul; O my God, I trust in you.” This is much closer to the most probable sense of the original Hebrew text but is far distant from the sense (and affect) of the Lutheran rendering employed in Bach’s cantata, which emphasizes longing.

<sup>3</sup>In older German, the “dass ... nicht” construction is sometimes used where modern German would use “damit ... nicht” (in English, “lest”).

<sup>4</sup>The earliest surviving source for this cantata, a score copied after Bach’s death, here reads “Toben” (i.e., a noun, “raging”) instead of “toben” (a verb, “[to] rage”). Presumably, however, it was the verb form that was used in Bach’s own materials, echoing the use of this verb in Sirach 40:18 in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day (which, however, is 40:34 in some Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, and is 39:34 or 39:28 in most modern Bibles). Some modern editions of the cantata do give the noun “Toben” here and try (unsuccessfully) to make sense of the word by adding a comma after it.

<sup>5</sup>That is, in this world of temporality, as opposed to the world (of eternity) to come.

<sup>6</sup>“Kreuz” here means the suffering of metaphorically bearing and enduring the cross, as Jesus did literally. In the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, Jesus says in Luke 14:27, “Wer nicht sein Kreuz trägt und mir nachfolget, der kann nicht mein Jünger sein” (“Whoever does not bear his cross and follow me, he cannot be my disciple”).

<sup>7</sup>The language of this line comes from Matthew 24:45-46, “Welcher ist aber nun ein treuer und kluger Knecht, den der Herr gesetzt hat über sein Gesinde, dass er ihnen zu rechter Zeit Speise gebe? Selig ist der Knecht, wenn sein Herr kommt und findet ihn also tun” (“Which man is now, though, a faithful and wise servant whom the master has set over his domestics so that he [the servant] at the proper time may give them [the household] food? Blessed is the servant if his master comes [back] and finds him [the servant still] doing so”).

<sup>8</sup>The sense of this line is derived from Luther’s idiosyncratic rendering of Psalm 94:14-15, “der HERR wird sein Volk nicht verstossen ... denn Recht muss doch Recht bleiben” (“the LORD will not cast off his people ... for [God’s essentially benevolent] justice must indeed remain [God’s benevolent] justice”). That is, the poetry might seem to be saying that bad things happening to people are reflections of God’s justice; but the likely biblically-tinged sense of this poetry is the opposite: even though bad things happen to believers, they should be comforted in understanding that God’s true justice is such that they will be shown God’s faithful mercy.

4. *Leite mich in deiner Wahrheit und lehre mich; denn du bist der Gott, der mir hilft, täglich harre ich dein.*<sup>9</sup>

4. *Lead<sup>10</sup> me in your truth and teach me; for you are the God who [eternally] saves<sup>11</sup> me; daily I await you.*

5. Cedern müssen von den Winden  
Oft viel Ungemach empfinden,  
[Niemals] werden sie verkehrt..<sup>12</sup>  
Rat und Tat auf Gott gestellet,  
Achtet nicht, was widerbellet,  
Denn sein Wort ganz anders lehrt.

5. From the winds, cedars must  
Often experience much disturbance;<sup>13</sup>  
[Never] do they get knocked over.<sup>14</sup>  
Counsel and action based on [the word of] God  
Pays no heed to what bellows against [it],

<sup>9</sup>Psalm 25:5.

<sup>10</sup>The verb “leiten” can rendered “to guide” or “to lead” or “to conduct.” Bach apparently understood the Psalm’s use of “leite” here in terms of the story in Genesis 28:10-22 of a “stairway to heaven” on which Jacob, in a dream, sees “angels of God” going up and down. This stairway was rendered “eine Leiter” (“a ladder”) in the Luther Bibles. In the early eighteenth century, the “staff” of lines on which to position written musical pitches was called “eine Leiter,” and thus, it appears, Bach set the words “leite mich” at mm. 1–8 of movement 4 in Cantata 150 such that the notes climb a great number of “steps” on an extended “Leiter,” thereby making a sonic allusion to Genesis 28:12 (and its echo in John 1:51); i.e., one is presumably meant to hear Bach’s music as saying “conduct me in your truth on your ladder to heaven, namely, to my eternal salvation.” The bass aria in Cantata 31 speaks of the cross of Jesus as a “Leiter” on which Jesus is hoisted to go to the throne of honor (in heaven).

<sup>11</sup>“Helfen” often means simply “to help,” but here it is used by Luther in its Christian theological sense of “to save,” i.e., “to bring eternal salvation.”

<sup>12</sup>The earliest surviving source, and thus modern editions, here read “*Oftmals* werden sie *verkehrt*” (literally, “Oftentimes they [the cedars] will be subverted/inverted.” But it does not seem to make any sense to speak of cedars being “subverted” or “inverted.” Some translators have rightly rendered “verkehrt” figuratively as “overturned” or “twisted about” or “uprooted.” But on account of its use of the adverb “*oftmals*” (“*oftentimes*”), the line just does not seem to make sense—cedars are celebrated frequently in the Bible and elsewhere as symbols of indomitable strength and power. The distinguished Bach scholar Hans-Joachim Schulze recently made the marvelous discovery that once the wordings “Oftmals” in this movement and “Führen” in movement 7 are emended, the first letters of all the lines from the poetic texts of this cantata (i.e., movements 3, 5, and 7) spell out “DOCTOR CONRAD MECKBACH.” (Note that in early-eighteenth-century German, “Zeder” was also spelled “Cedar,” and “Kreuz” was also spelled “Creuz” or “Creutz”; “Doktor,” however, was spelled “Doctor.”) Herr Meckbach was Bach’s special advocate on the town council and sometime mayor in Mühlhausen, where Bach became organist of the Blasiuskirche from 1707 to 1708. Thus, line 3 here in movement 5 clearly requires a word beginning with the letter “n.” Schulze has helpfully suggested that the original text may have read “*Niemals* werden sie verkehrt” (“[But] never do they get knocked over”), with “verkehrt” meant to be understood figuratively in its (documented) sense of “knocked over, and thus destroyed.” Less likely, the reading in Bach’s original materials might have been “*Nachmals* werden sie *verzehrt*” (“Subsequently, they [the cedars] come to be consumed [by fire]”). It is, indeed, specific biblical language to speak of “cedars” being “consumed [Luther Bibles, ‘verzehrt’] by fire”; the expression appears in Judges 9:15 and Zechariah 11:1. That is, to “win” against cedars—since you cannot knock them over—you have to resort to burning them down. Judges 9:15 reads “Der Dornbusch sprach zu den Bäumen: Ists wahr, dass ihr mich zum König salbt über euch, so kommt und vertraut euch unter meinem Schatten; wo nicht, so gehe Feuer aus dem Dornbusch und verzehre die Zedern” (“The thornbush said to the trees, ‘Should it be true that you [would] anoint me as king over you, then come and consign yourselves in my shade; if not, then may fire go out of the thornbush and consume the cedars”). Curiously, in Bach’s Calov study Bible, the wording of this verse was printed as “*vertraget* euch unter meinem Schatten” (“hurry yourselves [to be over here] in my shade”; or, “get along [with one another] in my shade”); correcting the text, Bach quilled in a “u” at Calov’s “g.”

<sup>13</sup>“Ungemach” is apparently being used here in one of its older German senses, as a synonym for “Unruhe” (“disturbance”). The underlying notion of this movement is that of the Christian as a growing palm/cedar tree, drawing this imagery from Psalm 92:13, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “der Gerechte wird grünen wie ein Palmbaum, er wird wachsen wie ein Ceder auf Libanon” (“the righteous one will thrive like a palm tree; he will rise like [an indomitable] cedar on [the mountain range called] Libanon”).

<sup>14</sup>On the possibility of cedars coming to be “verzehrt” (“consumed by fire”), see fn. 12, above.

For his [God's "sure and instructive"] word teaches entirely otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

6. *Meine Augen sehen stets zu dem Herrn;  
denn er wird meinen Fuss aus dem Netze  
ziehen.*<sup>16</sup>

6. *My eyes look ever to the Lord; for he will draw my foot out  
of the snare.*<sup>17</sup>

7. Meine Tage in dem Leide  
Endet Gott dennoch zur Freude;  
Christen auf den Dornenwegen  
[Kriegen]<sup>18</sup> Himmels Kraft und Segen.

7. My days of sorrow<sup>21</sup>  
God ends, however, in joy;  
Christians [walking] on paths of thorns  
[Will acquire] heaven's strength and blessing/salvation.<sup>22</sup>  
If God remains my faithful protection;

<sup>15</sup>These are the sentiments of Titus 1:9, which, in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, speaks of the "Widersprecher" ("gainsayers") of the Christian beliefs proclaimed in God's word, which "gewiss ist, und lehren kann" ("is sure, and able to instruct/teach"). The cantata poet has ratcheted these sentiments up by using "widerbellet" ("bellows against"), effecting a rhyme with "gestellet."

<sup>16</sup>Psalm 25:15.

<sup>17</sup>Frequently in the Bible, a snare is used by hunters or soldiers to trap and kill animals or people. Apparently, "the snare" here in movement 6 refers to the "trap" of false doctrine.

<sup>18</sup>The earliest surviving source for this cantata, and thus modern editions, here read "Christen auf den Dornenwegen *führen* Himmels Kraft und Segen." The resulting text is grammatically correct, but it does not actually make sense: "Christians on the paths of thorns *lead/guide* heaven's strength and blessing/salvation." Given Schulze's brilliant discovery of the acrostic in this libretto, there can be no doubt that the first word of the cantata line was meant to be a word that starts with the letter "K." Schulze (see fn. 12, above) suggested changing the text to (the plural) "kühren," the older-German spelling of "küren" ("to choose"). This emendation makes excellent paleographical sense (in older German handwriting, "kühren" is visually quite similar to "führen"), but it would egregiously violate a fundamental tenet of Lutheranism. According to Lutheran doctrine, one emphatically does not, in actual effect, *choose* eternal salvation; i.e., you do not decide on God, God decides on you. In poetry of the time, an expression like "Himmels Kraft und Segen" was almost always interpreted as grammatically singular, with a verb conjugated to match. So most likely the verb here (evidently plural, whatever ones thinks the word might have been) belongs with (the plural) "Christen" as the subject of the sentence. (To accommodate the poetry's scansion, the verb also, of course, needs to have two syllables.) Though a bit awkward, the verb "küren" might still work here, however, in the singular past tense, with the (singular) "strength and blessing" as the subject—i.e., "Christen auf den Dornenwegen / [Kürte] Himmels Kraft und Segen" ("Heaven's strength and blessing/salvation / [Has] chose[n] Christians [walking] on paths of thorns"). It is worth noting that the first word of line 4 in movement 7 was musically set by Bach only in the alto line and without reiteration. And whatever the word was, it may have been exceptionally messy in its single entry in the now lost original materials that our earliest surviving source of Cantata 150 was copied from. Based on Lutheran biblical language and its conformity with Lutheran thought, the emendation "kriegen" ("to acquire/get") suggests itself, a possibility Schulze noted, but only parenthetically. The greater likelihood of "kriegen" as the verb here may find a basis in the talk of "acquiring/getting strength" from God, of one's "path," and of "waiting for the Lord," that is expressed in Luther's idiosyncratic rendering of Isaiah 40:27-31, "Warum sprichst du ... Mein Weg ist dem Herrn verborgen ... Die auf den Herrn harren, kriegen neue Kraft, ... dass sie wandeln und nicht müde werden" ("Why do you say ... 'My path is hidden from the Lord'? ... They who wait for the Lord, acquire new strength, ... so that they walk and do not become tired"); see also fn. 22, below.

<sup>21</sup>"Leid" here more likely means "sorrow" than "suffering" or "harm," as the language of lines 1–2 is derived from Isaiah 60:20, "der HERR wird dein ewiges Licht sein, und die Tage deines Leides sollen ein Ende haben" ("the LORD will be your eternal light, and the days of your sorrow shall have an end").

<sup>22</sup>The point, presumably, is that lines 3–4 are simply another way of expressing the sentiment of lines 1–2. They, in turn, are variations on the sentiment, highly favored by Luther, that is expressed in Acts 14:22, "And [Paulus] ermahneten sie, ... dass wir durch viel Trübsal müssen in das Reich Gottes gehen" ("And [the apostle Paul] exhorted them [i.e., the new followers of Jesus, ... saying] that we must through much tribulation go into the kingdom of God").

Bleibet Gott mein treuer Schutz,<sup>19</sup>  
Achte ich nicht Menschentrutz,<sup>20</sup>  
Christus, der uns steht zur Seiten,  
Hilft mir täglich sieghaft streiten.

If I pay no heed to people's blustering arrogance;<sup>23</sup>  
Christ, who stands by our side,  
Will daily help me to struggle victoriously.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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<sup>19</sup>Some modern editions have mistranscribed this word as “Schatz” (“treasure”). Perhaps significantly, in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, God is a good number of times called “mein Schutz” (“my protection”) but never “mein Schatz.”

<sup>20</sup>Some modern editions have mistranscribed this word as “Menschenkreuz” (“people’s cross-bearing”).

<sup>23</sup>“Trutz” (an alternate spelling of “Trotz”) had a variety of meanings in older German. In Cantata 150, the use of “*Menschen Trutz*” is probably drawing on the sentiments of Psalm 31:18-21, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “HERR ... du verbirgst sie heimlich bei dir vor jedermanns Trotz” (“LORD ... you secretly hide them [who trust in you], close to you [under your protective ‘wings’], from everyone’s blustering arrogance”).