

"Jesu, der du meine Seele" BWV 78

1. Jesu, der du meine Seele
Hast durch deinen bitteren Tod
Aus des Teufels finstern Höhle
Und der schweren Seelennot¹
Kräftiglich herausgerissen,
Und mich solches lassen wissen
Durch dein angenehmes Wort,
Sei doch itzt, o Gott, mein Hort!

1. Jesus, you who through
Your bitter death have,
With strength, torn my soul
From the devil's dark cave
And from the heavy anguish of the soul,
And have made me to know this
Through your propitious² Word,
Be even now, O God, my refuge.

2. Wir eilen mit schwachen, doch emsigen Schritten,
O Jesu, o Meister zu helfen, zu dir.
Du suchest die Kranken und Irrenden treulich.
Ach höre, wie wir
Die Stimmen erheben, um Hülfe zu bitten!
Es sei uns dein gnädiges Antlitz erfreulich!

2. We hasten with weak but diligent steps,
Oh Jesus, oh Master of Salvation,³ to you.
You seek the ailing and [spiritually] erring faithfully,
Ah, hear, how we
Raise our voices to plead for help/salvation.
Let your merciful countenance be gladdening to us.⁴

GENERAL NOTE: Movements 1 and 6 take their texts verbatim from the two outer stanzas of the hymn "Jesu, der du meine Seele." The internal movements quote or paraphrase other stanzas.

¹Not "Seelennot" but "Sündennot" ("anguish of sin") in the original hymn and in the printed text booklets that were made available to Bach's congregants at the 1724 performance of this cantata in Leipzig.

²The word "angenehm" can mean "pleasant," "comfortable," and the like. But the sense seems a bit different in Cantata 78, probably echoing Luther's usage of "angenehm" for his rendering of a key New Testament statement, in 2 Corinthians 6:2, "Sehet, jetzt ist die angenehme Zeit; jetzt ist der Tag des Heils!" ("Look, now is the *acceptable/propitious* time [Greek: "kairos *euprodektos*"]; now is the day of salvation"); this verse appears verbatim in Cantata 147.

³Crucial context for understanding this movement is provided by the biblical portion that was read at the liturgical occasion for which Bach composed Cantata 78, namely Luke 17:11-19, the story of "The Cleansing of Ten Lepers." In 17:13 the lepers are said to "lift up their voices" to Jesus, calling him "master," and in 17:19 Jesus responds, "Your faith [in God] has saved you." His response was rendered "dein Glaube hat dir *geholfen*" in the Luther Bibles known to Bach's original audiences. "*Helfen*" (to help/assist) was one of Luther's many metaphors for "to save" (that is, from a hellish life on earth, and from an afterlife in hell). In Bach's cantata duet, Luke's language is taken up by the "ailing and erring," who "raise their voices" to Jesus and call him "master." But they also apply to Jesus an extended savior-designation that has been eliminated, by mistake, in many modern editions of Cantata 78. These editions read: "Wir eilen mit schwachen, doch emsigen Schritten, o Jesu, o Meister, *zu helfen zu dir*" ("We hasten with weak but diligent steps, oh Jesus, oh master, *to [be of] help to you*"). This is doctrinally topsy-turvy. Lutheran poetry would never rightly say that "the erring" can "help" Jesus, and many translators of this libretto have simply emended this passage without necessarily realizing that they have done so. The misconstrued phrase "Meister, *zu helfen zu dir*" should read "*Meister zu helfen, zu dir*" (that is, with its comma placed two words later). "Meister zu helfen" ("Master of Salvation"; literally, "master of help") was a commonplace title for Jesus in the Lutheran discourse of Bach's day. The title originated from Isaiah 63:1 in the Luther Bible, where the blood-stained divine warrior—understood by Luther as the prefigurement of Jesus, the crucified son of God—says, in Luther's idiosyncratic translation, "Ich bins, der Gerechtigkeit lehret und ein Meister bin zu helfen" ("I am the one who teaches righteousness, and am a master of help/salvation")." And so, while Cantata 78's duet may at first glance appear to be a simple plea for God's everyday help and assistance, it is, in fact, a prayer for eternal salvation.

⁴This line alludes to the priestly blessing of Israel in Numbers 6:24-26, rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day as "Der HERR segne dich und behüte dich; der HERR lasse sein Angesicht leuchten über dir und sei dir gnädig; der HERR hebe sein Angesicht über dich, und gebe dir Frieden" ("The LORD bless you and protect you; the LORD let his countenance shine over you and be merciful to you; the LORD raise his countenance over you, and give you peace"). Luther understood this three-fold blessing as Trinitarian: "The LORD [God the Father] bless ...; the LORD [God the Son] let ...; the LORD [God the Holy Spirit] raise ..." There are extensive highlighting-markings — so far as we know, they are Bach's — among the long commentaries on this passage in Bach's Calov Bible (which he acquired for his personal library, apparently in the 1730s).

**3. Ach! ich bin ein Kind der Sünden,
Ach! ich irre weit und breit.**
Der Sünden Aussatz, so an mir zu finden,
Verlässt mich nicht in dieser Sterblichkeit.
Mein Wille trachtet nur nach Bösen.
Der Geist zwar spricht: ach! wer wird mich erlösen?
**Aber Fleisch und Blut zu zwingen
Und das Gute zu vollbringen,**
Ist über alle meine Kraft.
Will ich den Schaden nicht verhehlen,
So kann ich nicht, wie oft ich fehle, zählen.
Drum nehm ich nun der Sünden Schmerz und Pein
Und meiner Sorgen Bürde,
So mir sonst unerträglich würde,
Und⁵ liefre sie dir, Jesu, seufzend ein.
Rechne nicht die Missetat,

**3. Ah! I am a child of sin,
Ah! I err far and wide.⁶**
The leprosy of sin to be found in me
Does not leave me in this mortal life.
My will strives only for evil.
The spirit indeed declares, “Ah! who will redeem me?”⁷
**But to constrain flesh and blood
And to accomplish the good⁸**
Is beyond all my strength.⁹
When I do not hide the harm [I have done],¹⁰
I will be unable to count how often I fail [to do the
good].¹¹
Therefore I now take the grief and pain of sin
And my burden of worries,
Which would be unbearable to me otherwise,
And deliver them to you, Jesus, sighing.

⁵Modern editions of the cantata here read not “Und” (“and”) but the grammatically awkward “Ich” (“I”). The printed text booklets that were made available to Bach’s congregants at the 1724 performance of this cantata in Leipzig, however, read “Und”, and so does a score from the 1750s that was evidently copied directly or indirectly from Bach’s now lost composing score. Bach’s separate performing part, copied out by one of his students and first used at the 1724 performance, presumably in simple error, reads “Ich.”

⁶The notion here seems to be not only that one makes mistakes far and wide, but also that one, more generally, needs to get on the right “path.” “Weit und breit” in this hymn line is most likely meant in opposition to the “strait and narrow” that is counseled in Matthew 7:13-14 in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day: “Gehet ein durch die enge Pforte, denn die Pforte ist weit, und der Weg ist breit, der zur Verdammnis abführet; ... Und die Pforte ist eng, und der Weg ist schmal, der zum Leben führt” (“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the path is broad that leads away to damnation; ... and the gate is narrow and the path is strait [or, ‘constricted’] that leads to [eternal] life”). The modern expression “the straight and narrow [path],” insofar as it takes “straight” to mean “not crooked,” stems historically from a misunderstanding of the renderings “strait gate” and “narrow way” found in Matthew 7 in older English Bibles.

⁷Romans 7:24.

⁸Lines 4 to 7 of this movement allude extensively to Romans 7:18-24, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Ich weiss, dass in mir, ... wohnet nichts Gutes. Wollen habe ich wohl, aber vollbringen das Gute finde ich nicht. Denn das Gute, das ich will, das tue ich nicht; sondern das Böse, das ich nicht will, das tue ich. ... Wer wird mich erlösen?” (“I know that nothing good dwells in me. Desiring [to perform the good is something that] I possess, to be sure; but accomplishing the good [is something that] I will not find. Because the good I desire, that [is what] I do not perform; rather, the evil I do not desire, that [is what] I do perform. ... Who will redeem me?”)

⁹Lines 6–9 of this movement reflect the sense of what Jesus says to his disciples in Mark 14:38 (and the parallel Matthew 26:41, which is set at no. 24 in Bach’s St. Matthew Passion), as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Der Geist ist willig; aber das Fleisch ist schwach” (“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”). The Greek of Matthew and Mark, technically, says: “The spirit is *indeed* willing, but the flesh is weak.” Compare “der Geist zwar spricht” (“the spirit indeed declares”) in line 6 from the cantata movement.

¹⁰“The harm” that “I do not hide” is “the harm that I have done,” as is evident from the passage that this line alludes to, Psalm 32:5, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Darum bekenne ich dir meine Sünde und verhehle meine Missetat nicht” (“Therefore I acknowledge my sin to you and do not hide my misdeed”).

¹¹The verb “fehlen” here means not “to err [in doing something]” but “to fail [to do something],” as is evident from the passage that this line alludes to, Psalm 19:12-13, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Wer kann merken, wie oft er fehlet?” (“Who is able to perceive how often he fails?”).

Die dich, Herr, erzürnet hat!

4. Das Blut, so meine Schuld durchstreicht,
Macht mir das Herz wieder leicht
Und spricht mich frei.
Ruft mich der Höllen Heer zum Streite,
So stehet Jesus mir zur Seite,
Dass ich beherzt und sieghaft sei.

5. Die Wunden, Nägel, Kron und Grab,
Die Schläge, so man dort dem Heiland gab,
Sind ihm nunmehr Siegeszeichen
Und können mir verneute Kräfte reichen.
Wenn ein erschreckliches Gericht
Den Fluch vor die Verdammten spricht,
So kehrst du ihn in Segen.
Mich kann kein Schmerz und keine Pein bewegen,
Weil sie mein Heiland kennt;
Und da dein Herz vor mich in Liebe brennt,
So lege ich hinwieder
Das meine vor dich nieder.
**Dies mein Herz, mit Leid vermengt,
So dein teures Blut besprenget,
So am Kreuz vergossen ist,
Geb ich dir, Herr Jesu Christ.**

6. Nun du wirst mein Gewissen stillen,
So wider mich um Rache schreit,
Ja, deine Treue wird's erfüllen,
Weil mir dein Wort die Hoffnung beut.
Wenn Christen an dich glauben,
Wird sie kein Feind in Ewigkeit
Aus deinen Händen rauben.

**7. Herr, ich glaube, hilf mir Schwachen,
Lass mich ja verzagen nicht;
Du, du kannst mich stärker machen,
Wenn mich Sünd und Tod anficht.
Deiner Güte will ich trauen,
Bis ich fröhlich werde schauen**

**Do not reckon the misdeed
That has angered you, Lord.**

4. The blood [of Jesus], which strikes out my debt,¹²
Makes my heart light again
And declares me free.
If hell's host calls me to battle,
Jesus stands at my side,
So that I might be valiant and victorious.

5. The wounds, nails, crown, and grave,
The blows given to the savior there [at his crucifixion],
Are henceforth his signs of triumph
And can extend to me renewed strengths.
When a fearful judgment
Declares a curse on the damned,
You turn it into blessing.
No grief and no pain can move me,
For my savior knows them;
And because your heart burns with love for me,
I in return lay down
Mine [my heart] before you.
**This my heart, mixed with grief,
Sprinkled with your precious blood
That was shed on the cross,
I give you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

6. Now you will quiet my conscience,
Which cries for vengeance against me;
Yes, it [my conscience] will fulfill [the demands of] your
faithfulness,
For your word bids me hope.
When Christians believe in you,
No foe, into eternity,
Shall steal them from your hands.

**7. Lord, I believe; help/save weak me;
Yes, let me not despair;
You, you can make me stronger
When sin and death vex¹³ me.
I will trust in your goodness
Until, joyfully, I will see**

¹²This line is meant to be understood in light of “original sin,” the teaching (in Lutheran understanding) that through Adam’s Fall human nature is in its essence wholly corrupted. Dishonored with “guilt,” and in every respect at “fault,” humanity has incurred an infinitely crushing “debt.” The German word “Schuld” carries all three of these meanings. Only God possesses the power to reconcile humans to himself, and it was for this purpose that Jesus — the Messiah, and divine Son of God — died sacrificially, shedding his blood as the “Lamb of God,” on the cross. In this way, the blood of Jesus is said to have paid humanity’s sin-incurred debt, bestowed as an unmerited gift on sinners through the “Gnade” (“mercy/grace”) of God. In Cantata 78, the metaphor is graphical: the sinner’s debt is crossed out in God’s accounts book with ink of the blood of Jesus.

¹³“Anfechtung” (“vexation/temptation/affliction/tribulation”) was, and still is, the Lutheran term for a variety of tribulations surrounding doubts and terrors about one’s moral and spiritual stature before God.

**Dich, Herr Jesu, nach dem Streit
In der süßen Ewigkeit.**

**You, Lord Jesus, after the [end-time] battle,¹⁴
In sweet eternity.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV78 for an annotated translation

¹⁴Revelation 20:8 says that at the end of time there will be a great battle (Luther, “Streit”) to cleanse the earth of monsters and evil, and that God will bring a new heaven and earth after the battle. In Revelation 22:5, the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day proclaim that God and “the Lamb” (Jesus) will then reign “von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit” (“from eternity to eternity”).