

“Es ist das Heil uns kommen her” BWV 9

1. Es ist das Heil uns kommen her
Von Gnad und lauter Güte.
Die Werk, die helfen nimmermehr,
Sie mögen nicht behüten.
Der Glaub sieht Jesum Christum an,
Der hat genug für uns all getan,
Er ist der Mittler worden.

1. Salvation has come here, to us,
By [God’s] grace and pure goodness.
[Good] works—they never¹ help/save² [us]—
They are not able³ to protect [us from God’s wrath].⁴
Faith looks to Jesus Christ,
Who has made atonement⁵ for all of us;
He has become the mediator [between God and humankind].⁶

2. Gott gab uns ein Gesetz, doch waren wir zu schwach,
Dass wir es hätten halten können.
Wir gingen nur den Sünden nach,
Kein Mensch war fromm zu nennen;
Der Geist blieb an dem Fleische kleben
Und wagte nicht zu widerstreben.
Wir sollten im⁷ Gesetze gehn
Und dort als wie in einem Spiegel sehn,
Wie unsere Natur unartig sei;

2. God [via Moses] gave us a [code of] law,⁸ yet we were too weak
To have been able to abide by it.
We walked only in pursuit of sins;
No person could be called pious;
The spirit stayed clinging to the flesh
And did not venture to resist [the flesh].
We were supposed to walk in the law [of Moses]⁹
And, just as in a mirror, were supposed to see there

GENERAL NOTE: Movements 1 and 6 take their texts verbatim from stanzas 1 and 12 of the hymn “Es ist das Heil uns kommen her.” The remaining movements mostly paraphrase the content from other stanzas.

¹“Nimmermehr,” in the older German of this Lutheran hymn text does not mean “nevermore” in the sense of “never again” or “no longer” but in the sense of “never, ever.”

²“Helfen” often means simply “to help,” but here it is also used in its theological sense of “to save,” i.e., “to bring eternal salvation.”

³In older German, “mögen” was often used as a synonym for “können” (“to be able to”). For example, where later Luther Bibles in Luke 6:39 read “Kann auch ein Blinder einem Blinden den Weg weisen?,” the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day read “Mag auch ein Blinder einem Blinden den Weg weisen?” (“Is a blind man, too, able to show a blind man the way [to go somewhere]?”).

⁴The idea behind this line is that without grace one can only displease God.

⁵The expression “genug getan,” in this context, is a reference to the technical term “Gegugtuung” (“doing [legal] satisfaction,” in its specific theological sense: namely, the atonement effected by Jesus’s dying on the cross for humankind’s sin, in accordance with the belief that Jesus’s suffering was a sacrifice serving as the penalty owed to God for sin). As Luther fundamentally expressed it, in *Crucigers Sommerpostille* of 1544 (a printed collection of Luther’s sermons), “Das Wort Genugtuung [sollte] deuten, dass Christus hat für unsere Sünde genug getan” (“The word ‘Genugtuung’ [should be] interpreted [against ‘the Papists,’ as to capture the sense] that Christ has atoned [or, ‘has made satisfaction’; literally, ‘has done enough’] for our sin”). Lutheranism taught that although Jesus died for all people, not all people will actually obtain salvation with a blessed afterlife in heaven. (Calvinism, by contrast, taught that Jesus died only for the few people that God had, already before Creation, chosen to bless with eternal salvation.)

⁶As expressed in 1 Timothy 2:5.

⁷Some modern editions read “in” here, such that “in Gesetze” might be rendered literally as “in [the] laws [of various sorts and origins],” i.e., where “Gesetze” is apparently accusative plural. The separate bass part used in Bach’s performances does seem to read “in,” but his composing score reads “im Gesetze” (“in the law [of Moses]”), i.e., where “Gesetze” is thus dative singular. See also the discussion of the dative “in seinem Gesteze” (“in his [God’s] law”) in fn. 9, below.

⁸The expression “God gave a law,” taken from Psalm 78:5 in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day (“Er [Gott] ... gab ein Gesetz”), refers to God’s ordaining the Torah/Law of Moses in ancient Israel. The cantata’s “us” includes ancient Messiah-expecting Israelites as proto-Christians.

⁹The language of this line is derived from Psalm 78:10, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Sie ... wollten nicht in seinem Gesetze [other Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, ‘Gesetz’] wandeln” (“They did not want to walk in his [God’s] law”). Both “wandeln” and “geh[e]n” can be rendered “to walk”; the poet chose the latter for its rhyme with “seh[e]n” (“to see”).

Und dennoch blieben wir dabei.
Aus eigener Kraft war niemand fähig,
Der Sünden Unart zu verlassen,
Er mocht auch alle Kraft zusammenfassen.

How depraved¹⁰ our nature is;¹¹
And, nonetheless, we stayed at it [our depravity].
Nobody, by his own might, was capable
Of breaking off from sin's depravity,
Even if he was able¹² to concentrate all his might.

3. Wir waren schon zu tief gesunken,
Der Abgrund schluckt uns völlig ein,
Die Tiefe drohte schon den Tod,
Und dennoch konnt in solcher Not
Uns keine Hand behülflich sein.

3. We had indeed sunk too deep;
The bottomless pit swallowed us up entirely;
The abyss [of Satan]¹³ indeed threatened [us with] death¹⁴
And, nonetheless, in such need
No [merely human] hand¹⁵ was able to be helpful to us.

4. Doch musste das Gesetz erfüllet werden;
Deswegen kam das Heil der Erden,
Des Höchsten Sohn, der hat es selbst erfüllt
Und seines Vaters Zorn gestillt.
Durch sein unschuldig Sterben
Liess er uns Hülf erwerben.
Wer nun demselben traut,

4. Yet the law [of Moses] had to be fulfilled;¹⁷
Therefore the salvation of the earth came,
The Most High's son,¹⁸ who has fulfilled it himself
And appeased his father's wrath.
Through his dying, innocent,

¹⁰In modern German, "unartig" means "unreasonable" or "naughty," but in older German, particularly in Lutheran usage, it was a synonym for "lasterhaft" ("sinful," "corrupted," "depraved").

¹¹The Lutheran sense here is that the law of Moses, by warnings and punishments on the subject of various sins, is a "mirror" in which humanity is supposed to come to know its own sinfulness. The classic statement and explication of this central belief was expressed in the Lutheran church's "Konkordienformel" ("Formula of Concord") of 1577, which reads "So ist auch die Lehre des Gesetzes in und bei den guten Werken der Gläubigen darum vonnöten, dann sonst kann ihm der Mensch gar leicht einbilden, dass sein Werk und Leben ganz rein und vollkommen sei; aber das Gesetz Gottes schreibt den Gläubigen die guten Werk also für, dass es zugleich wie in einem Spiegel zeigt und weiset, dass sie uns in diesem Leben noch unvollkommen und unrein sein, dass wir mit dem lieben Paulo sagen müssen: 'Wann ich mir gleich nichts bewusst bin, so bin ich darum nicht gerechtfertiget'" ("So the doctrine of the law [of God through Moses] in and with the good works of the [Christian] believers is therefore also necessary, for otherwise a man is very easily able to imagine that his works and life be completely pure and perfect; but the law of God prescribes the good works for the believers in such a way that it [the law] shows and indicates, as in a mirror, at once, that they [the good works] are still imperfect and impure for us in this life [on earth], so that we have to say with our beloved [apostle] Paul [quoting 1 Corinthians 4:4, not quite verbatim]: 'Even when I am not immediately aware of anything [against] myself [that condemns me], I am not thereby justified [for salvation]'").

¹²On "mögen" as a synonym for "können" ("to be able to"), see fn. 3, above.

¹³"Die Tiefe" is singular ("the abyss/deep"), as opposed to the plural "die Tiefen" ("the depths"). The language of this line is apparently derived from Revelation 2:24, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Euch aber sage ich und den andern ... die nicht erkannt haben die Tiefe des Satans (als sie sagen) ..." ("But I say to you and to the others ... who have not known 'the abyss of Satan,' as they say ..."). Bach's Calov Bible explains that "die Tiefe" here refers to "den Abgrund und das verborgene Übel [des Satans]" ("the bottomless pit and the hidden evil [of Satan])."

¹⁴The devil, Satan, had the power of death, but according to Hebrews 2:14, Jesus destroyed this: "... er durch den Tod die Macht nähme dem, der des Todes Gewalt hatte, das ist dem Teufel" ("... through death [on the cross] he [Jesus] would take [away] the potency from him who had the power of death; that is, from the devil").

¹⁵This talk of being "sunk too deep" with "no hand [being] able to be helpful" is presumably meant to contrast with the details of the narrative in Matthew 14:22-33 (a story traditionally known as "The Walking on the Water") about the disciple Peter sinking into the sea and being rescued by Jesus's extending a (human-divine) hand to grasp him.

¹⁷In Luke 24:44, Jesus declares, "es muss alles erfüllet werden, was von mir geschrieben ist im Gesetz Mosis, in den Propheten, und in den Psalmen" ("Everything has to be fulfilled that is written of me [as God's promised messiah] in the law of Moses, in the prophets, and in the psalms").

¹⁸"Most High" is a name used frequently in the Hebrew Bible for the Lord God of Israel. In the New Testament, God the father (but not Jesus, the son) is called "Most High."

Wer auf sein Leiden baut,
Der gehet nicht verloren.
Der Himmel ist vor den¹⁶ erkoren,
Der wahren Glauben mit sich bringt
Und fest um Jesu Arme schlingt.

He has purchased salvation for us.¹⁹
Now whoever trusts that same man [Jesus],
Whoever relies on his [Jesus's] suffering [on the cross],
He [the believer] walks [through life] not lost²⁰ [from salvation].
Heaven is chosen for him
Who has and holds within himself true faith [in Jesus]²¹
And tightly clasps Jesus's arms.²²

5. Herr, du siehst statt guter Werke
Auf des Herzens Glaubensstärke,
Nur den Glauben nimmst du an.
Nur der Glaube macht gerecht,
Alles andre scheint zu schlecht,
Als dass es uns helfen kann.

5. Lord, instead of good works,
You look upon the heart's strength of faith;
Only faith do you accept.
Only faith justifies [for salvation];
Everything else shines²³ too weakly
To be able to help/save us.

6. Wenn wir die Sünd aus dem Gesetz erkennen,
So schlägt es das Gewissen nieder;
Doch ist das unser Trost zu nennen,
Dass wir im Evangelio
Gleich wieder froh
Und freudig werden:

6. When, from the law [of Moses],²⁶ we know sin,
Then our conscience is cast down;²⁷
Yet this is to be called our consolation:
That in the gospel [of Jesus]
We immediately become glad
And joyful again;

¹⁶Bach's composing score reads "vor den" ("for him"), but the separate bass part used in his performances (erroneously) reads "vor dem" ("in the face of him").

¹⁹The idea behind these lines is that, by dying on the cross as an innocent victim, Jesus "purchased" the eternal life of the believer. (It is not the "us" who do the purchasing—"Durch sein ... Sterben liess er uns Hülff erwerben" does not mean "Through his dying, he let us purchase help/salvation.") Some of the language here is borrowed from Acts 20:28, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "So habt nun acht ... zu weiden die Gemeinde Gottes, welche er durch sein eigen Blut erworben hat" ("So now pay attention ... to feeding the community/congregation of [believers in] God, which [community] he [Jesus] has purchased through his own blood [in dying on the cross]").

²⁰According to the Gospel of John, believers in Jesus partly experience eternal salvation already on earth, a salvation that continues more fully in the afterlife; unbelievers in Jesus, however, partly experience eternal condemnation already on earth—they are said to be "lost." That is to say, "verloren" is a sort of technical term for being "not saved" (it does not mean "forsaken," "forlorn," or "abandoned").

²¹"Sich etwas mitbringen" ("to bring something with one") is here used apparently in the sense of "etwas bei sich haben" ("to have and hold something with[in] one").

²²This is meant to allude to the disciple Peter being grasped by the hand of Jesus (i.e., to use the turned-around language of the cantata, Peter "tightly clasps Jesus's arms") in Matthew 14:22-33 (see fn. 15, above), where Jesus calls Peter "du Kleingläubiger" ("you man of little faith").

²³"Scheint" here apparently means not "seems/appears" but "shines forth," making "schlecht" not an adjective ("poor/weak") but an adverb ("poorly/weakly"). Wisdom of Solomon 3:6-7 (which was specifically understood in light of Matthew 13:43) reads, in Luther Bibles of Bach's day, "Er prüfet sie [die gerechten Seelen] wie Gold im Ofen, und nimmt sie an, wie ein völliges Opfer; ... werden sie helle scheinen" ("He [God] tested them [the righteous souls]; or, the just(ified) souls] like gold in the furnace, and accepted them like a perfect offering; ... [via the gift of faith] they will shine brightly").

²⁶This gives expression not to the general notion that people recognize their sin in breaking the law—i.e., the line does not mean "When we recognize our sin against (God's) law"—but to the specific notion that people come to know what sin is from the law (of Moses), whose function, Luther says, is to "accuse" and "kill" (i.e., even when it is obeyed), whereas the gospel (of Christ) "forgives" and "gives life." The language and theology of the cantata's "Wenn wir die Sünd aus dem Gesetz erkennen" is derived from Romans 3:20, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Kein Fleisch durch des Gesetzes Werke vor ihm gerecht sein mag; denn durch das Gesetz kommt Erkenntnis der Sünde" ("In the face of him [God], no flesh is able through [doing] the works of the law [of Moses] to be just[ified for salvation]; for through the law comes knowledge of sin").

²⁷The line does not mean "Then our conscience strikes it [the law (of Moses)] down."

Dies²⁴ stärket unsern Glauben wieder.
Drauf hoffen wir der Zeit,
Die Gottes Gütigkeit
Uns zugesaget hat,
Doch aber auch aus weisem Rat
Die Stunden²⁵ uns verschwiegen.
Jedoch, wir lassen uns begnügen,
Er weiss es, wenn es nötig ist,
Und brauchet keine List
An uns; wir dürfen auf ihn bauen
Und ihm allein vertrauen.

**7. Ob sichs anliess, als wollt er nicht,
Lass dich es nicht erschrecken;
Denn wo er ist am besten mit,
Da will ers nicht entdecken.
Sein Wort lass dir gewisser sein,
Und ob dein Herz spräch lauter Nein,
So lass doch dir nicht grauen.**

This strengthens our faith again.
[And] so we await²⁸ the [end] time
That God's goodness²⁹
Has promised to us,
But yet whose hours, also out of wise counsel,
[God's goodness] has kept quiet from us.
We are, however, content;
When there is need,³⁰ he knows it,
And does not use any cunning
On us; we may rely on him
And trust in him alone.

**7. If it seemed as though he [God] was not willing,³¹
Do not let it alarm you;
For where he is most present,³²
There he will not reveal³³ it.
Let his word be more certain to you,
And although your heart might say nothing but "No,"
Do not, nonetheless, let yourself be afraid.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV9 for an annotated translation

²⁴Some modern editions here read “dies nur stärket” (“this only strengthens”), but in Bach’s own materials the musical setting simply repeats the first word: “dies, dies stärket” (“this, this strengthens”).

²⁵Some modern editions here read “die Stunde” (“the hour”), but Bach’s own materials read “die Stunden” (“the hours”). Regarding “the hours,” see also fn. 29, below.

²⁸In older German, “hoffen” (“to hope”) was often used as a synonym for “warten” (“to wait”); also, these verbs could take objects in either the genitive case (as here, “hoffen wir der Zeit”) or the accusative (“hoffen wir auf die Zeit”), without change in meaning.

²⁹“God’s goodness” is biblically associated with the personification of wisdom. In Wisdom of Solomon 7:26, wisdom is said to be “ein unbefleckter Spiegel der Göttlichen Kraft, und ein Bild seiner Gütigkeit” (“an unspotted mirror of Godly might, and an image of his goodness”); furthermore, 8:8 says of wisdom: “Begehret einer viel Dings zu wissen, so kann sie erraten, beide was vergangen, und zukünftig ist; ... Zeichen und Wunder weiss sie zuvor, und wie es zun [i.e., zu den] Zeiten und Stunden ergehen soll” (“If any [human person] desires to know many things, she [the divine personification of wisdom] is able, then, to infer both what is past and what is future; ... signs and wonders she knows in advance, and how it [any situation] shall come to pass at the times and hours”).

³⁰This line does not mean “He knows when it is necessary.” Its language is apparently derived from Hebrews 4:16, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “... auf dass wir Barmherzigkeit empfangen und Gnade finden, auf die Zeit, wenn uns Hilfe not sein wird” (“... so that we may receive mercy and find grace for the time when to us help/salvation will be needed”), i.e., where “not sein wird” and “nötig sein wird” are synonymous. See also line 5 of movement 3.

³¹What God might have seemed unwilling to do was satisfy people’s hope. Hope is the subject of the previous stanza of this hymn, well-known in Bach’s day.

³²“Mitsein” (“to be among those who are present”) is an old-fashioned separable verb.

³³“Entdecken” is used in its older German sense as a synonym for “abdecken” (“uncover,” “reveal”).