

“Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält” BWV 178

**1. Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält,
Wenn unsre Feinde toben,
Und er unser Sach nicht zufällt
Im Himmel hoch dort oben,
Wo er Israel Schutz nicht ist
Und selber bricht der Feinde List,
So ists mit uns verloren.**

**2. Was Menschenkraft und -witz anfäht,⁵
Soll uns billig nicht schrecken;
Denn Gott der Höchste steht uns bei
Und machet uns von ihren Stricken frei.
Er sitzt an der höchsten Stätt,
Er wird ihrn Rat aufdecken.
Die Gott im Glauben fest umfassen,
Will er niemals versäumen noch verlassen;
Er stürzet der Verkehrten Rat
Und hindert ihre böse Tat.
Wenn sie's aufs klügste greifen an,
Auf Schlangenlist und falsche Ränke sinnen,
Der Bosheit Endzweck zu gewinnen;**

**1. Unless¹ God the Lord holds fast by us
When our enemies rage;
And [unless] he, in high heaven there above,
Engages² our [battle] cause;³
Unless he is Israel's protection,
And himself foils the enemies' stratagem,⁴
Then, for us, all is doomed.**

**2. Whatever human power and human wisdom⁶ embarks
upon
Shall, [rightly and] properly,⁷ not terrify us;
For God the Most High⁸ assists us
And makes us free of their snares.
He sits [in heaven] in the most high place;
He will uncover their scheme.
Those who tightly embrace God in faith,
He will never leave nor forsake;
He subverts the scheme of the perverse⁹
And stymies their evil action.
If they attack in the most crafty fashion,
Devising serpent-like cunning¹⁰ and false machinations**

GENERAL NOTE: This text draws on one of the oldest Lutheran chorales, a paraphrase and expansion of Psalm 124 that appeared in the 1524 Erfurt Enchiridion. It was designated as a hymn for the Lutheran church, which explains its stance of relentless persecution by “enemies,” doubtless meant to be understood here (with multiple references to “heresy”) principally as the Roman Catholic church. The hymn’s first stanza and last two stanzas are presented intact as the first and last movements of the cantata; the inner movements quote or paraphrase the inner stanzas.

¹In older German, the expression “wo nicht” was a synonym for “wenn nicht” (“unless,” “if not”).

²The verb “zufallen” had a wide variety of meanings in older German. Here it seems to be employed as a synonym for “einfallen” in its sense of “to engage.”

³“Unser Sache” here apparently refers to “unser Kriegssache” (“our cause in battle/war”).

⁴“Der Feinde List” here apparently refers to “der Feinde Kriegslist” (“the enemies’ stratagem in battle/war”).

⁵“Anfahen” is an older-German alternate spelling of “anfangen.”

⁶“Menschenwitz” is an older-German synonym for “menschliche Weisheit” (“human wisdom”), corresponding to the Latin “sapientia humana.”

⁷“Billig” is employed here in one of its older-German senses, as a synonym for “angemessen” in the sense of “properly.”

⁸“Most High” is a name used frequently in the Hebrew Bible for the Lord God of Israel.

⁹The language of this line is taken from Luther’s rendering of Job 5:13, “[Gott] stürzt der Verkehrten Rat” (“God subverts the scheme of the perverse”).

¹⁰This is a reference to Adam and Eve’s being enticed by the “serpent” (understood as the devil) to disobey God in the garden of Eden. In the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, Genesis 3:1 reads “Und die Schlange war listiger denn alle Tiere auf dem Felde, die Gott

So geht doch Gott ein ander Bahn:
Er führt die Seinigen mit starker Hand,
Durchs Kreuzesmeer in das gelobte Land,
Da wird er alles Unglück wenden.
Es steht in seinen Händen.

3. Gleichwie die wilden Meereswellen
Mit Ungestüm ein Schiff zerschellen,
So raset auch der Feinde Wut
Und raubt das beste Seelengut.
Sie wollen Satans Reich erweitern,
Und Christi Schifflin soll zerscheitern.

4. **Sie stellen uns wie Ketzern nach,**
Nach unserm Blut sie trachten;
Noch rühmen sie sich Christen auch,
Die Gott allein gross achten.
Ach Gott, der teure Name dein
Muss ihrer Schalkheit Deckel sein,

To carry off the ultimate aim of their malice,¹¹
Then God, however, travels another path:
With a mighty hand he leads those who are his
Through the Sea of the Cross [of Christ] into the Promised
Land [of heaven],¹²
Where he will reverse all misfortune.
It¹³ rests in his hands.

3. Just like the wild waves of the sea,
In a tempest, batter a ship,
So also the enemies' anger rages,
And despoils the most goodly kindheartedness.¹⁴
They [the enemies] want to enlarge Satan's kingdom,¹⁵
And [they want that] Christ's little/darling ship [the church¹⁶]
should smash to bits.

4. **They lie in wait for us as though [we were] heretics;¹⁷**
They seek after our blood;
Yet they pride themselves as Christians, too,
Who greatly esteem God alone.
Ah, God, they must be using your precious name
As the cloak¹⁸ of their evil;¹⁹

der HERR gemacht hatte, und sprach zu dem Weibe: Ja, sollte Gott gesagt haben, ihr sollt nicht essen von allerlei Bäumen im Garten?" ("And the serpent was more cunning than all beasts of the field that the LORD God had made, and said to the woman [Eve], Yes, [well,] shall God [really] have said, You [plural] shall not eat from all manner of trees in the garden?").

¹¹That is, in Lutheran theology, of undermining faith.

¹²This is a Christian analogy to the Exodus narrative, recalled in Psalm 136, of God leading his people Israel "with a mighty hand" through the parted "sea of reeds" (Luther Bibles, "Schilfmeer") and through the wilderness into the Promised Land, Canaan.

¹³That is, protection and thus salvation.

¹⁴"Seelengut" refers not to the soul's goods and possessions but to its goodness; the (older-German) expression is loosely synonymous with "gutmütigkeit" ("good-naturedness").

¹⁵"Satan's kingdom" contrasts with what the New Testament, in most English translations, calls "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven."

¹⁶In older German, "Christi Schifflin" ("Christ's little/darling ship) was a synonym for "the church"; the same went for the expression "Petri Schifflin" ("[the apostle] Peter's little/darling ship").

¹⁷The language and sentiments of this line are derived from Acts 9:24, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Es ward Saulus kund getan, dass sie ihm nachstellten" ("It was made known to Saul [who had just become a follower of Jesus] that they [the Jews] lay in wait for him").

¹⁸In older German, "Deckel" was a synonym for "Deckmantel" ("cloak").

¹⁹The word "Schalkheit" has come to mean "knavery" or "mountebankery," but in the Luther Bibles it had a variety of other meanings, including "iniquity," "sin," and "evil." This line of the hymn derives its sense from 1 Peter 2:16, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "... als die Freien, und nicht, als hättet ihr die Freiheit zum Deckel der Bosheit, sondern als die Knechte Gottes" ("[Live/Act, you Christians,] as the freeborn, and [live/act] not as though you would have your freedom [to be used by you] for a cloak of wickedness, but [as though you would have your freedom] as the servants of God").

Du wirst einmal aufwachen.

5. Auf sperren sie den Rachen weit,

Nach Löwenart mit brüllendem Getöse;

Sie fletschen ihre Mörderzähne

Und wollen uns verschlingen.

Jedoch,

Lob und Dank sei Gott allezeit;

Der Held aus Juda schützt uns noch,

Es wird ihn' nicht gelingen.

Sie werden wie die Spreu vergehn,

Wenn seine Gläubigen wie grüne Bäume stehn.

Er wird ihrn Strick zerreißen gar

Und stürzen ihre falsche Lehr.

Gott wird die törichten Propheten

Mit Feuer seines Zornes töten

Und ihre Ketzerei verstören.

Sie werdens Gott nicht wehren.

6. Schweig, schweig nur, taumelnde Vernunft!

Sprich nicht: Die Frommen sind verlorn,

Das Kreuz hat sie nur neu geboren.

You will at some time awaken [to protect us].²⁰

5. They open wide their maw

In the manner of a lion, with roaring sound;

They bare their murderous fangs

And want to devour us.

But—

Praise and thanks be to God always—

[Jesus,] the hero from Judah protects us yet;

They will not succeed.

They will pass away²¹ like chaff,

Whereas²² [those of] his who have [true] faith will stand like verdant trees.

He will completely tear apart their snares,

And subvert their false teaching.²³

God will put the foolish prophets²⁴ to death

With the fire of his wrath,

And will crush²⁵ their heresy.

They will not hinder²⁶ [the teachings of] God.

6. Be silent, simply be silent, tottery reason.

Do not say: “The godly are doomed”;

The cross has simply begotten them anew.²⁷

²⁰This line alludes to the Hebraism “zu einem aufwachen” (“to awaken for one”) employed, e.g., in Job 8:6, “So du rein und fromm bist, so wird er aufwachen zu dir” (“If you are pure and godly, then he [God] will awaken for you [i.e., God will bestir himself to help/protect you]”).

²¹The more common verb to use with “chaff” in such a context would have been “verwehen” (“to be scattered [by the wind]”), whose clipped form, “verwehn,” could easily have been used in place of this line’s “vergehn,” a clipped form of “vergehen” (“to pass away”). The poet presumably wished to allude to the sentiments of Matthew 3:12, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Er hat seine Worf-schau-fel [or, ‘Wurf-schau-fel’] in seiner Hand; er wird seine Tenne fegen und den Weizen in seine Scheune sammeln, aber die Spreu wird er verbrennen mit ewigem Feuer” (“He [God] has his winnowing shovel in his hand; he will sweep [i.e., purge] his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn up with eternal fire”).

²²“Wenn” is apparently being used here as a synonym for “wohingegen” (“whereas”).

²³“Lahr” is an older-German spelling of “Lehre” (“teaching,” “doctrine”), often employed in poetry to accommodate rhymes.

²⁴This line alludes to Lamentations 2:14, “Deine Propheten haben dir lose und törichte Gesichte gepredigt” (“Your prophets have preached lax and foolish visions to you [Daughter Zion]”).

²⁵In older German, especially in the Luther Bibles, “verstören” was often employed as a synonym for “zerstören” (“to destroy,” “to crush”).

²⁶“Wehren” is apparently used here in one of its older German senses, of “verhindern” (“get in the way of”) or “verbieten” (“to forbid”).

²⁷“Neu geboren” or “neugeboren” were synonyms for “wiedergeboren” (“to be born/begotten again/anew”). The sense of this line and the next is derived from 1 Peter 1:3-4, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Gelobet sei Gott, und der Vater unsers Herrn Jesu Christi, der uns nach seiner grossen Barmherzigkeit wiedergeboren hat, zu einer lebendigen Hoffnung, durch die

Denn denen, die auf Jesum hoffen,
Steht stets die Tür der Gnaden offen;
Und wenn sie Kreuz und Trübsal drückt,
So werden sie mit Trost erquickt.

For to those who hope in Jesus
The door of grace stands ever open;
And if cross-bearing and tribulation weighs them down,
Then they will be restored by [Christ's] consolation.

**7. Die Feind sind all in deiner Hand,
Darzu all ihr Gedanken;
Ihr Anschläg sind dir, Herr, bekannt,
Hilf nur, dass wir nicht wanken.
Vernunft wider den Glauben ficht,
Aufs Künftge will sie trauen nicht,
Da du wirst selber trösten.**

**7. The enemies are all in your hand,
Along with all their [evil] thoughts;
Their designs²⁹ are known to you, Lord;
Simply help [us so] that we do not waver [in our faith].
Reason fights³⁰ against faith;
It [reason] will not put stock³¹ in the time [of the afterlife]
to come,
Where you yourself will console [us, your proper
believers].**

**Den Himmel und auch die Erden
Hast du, Herr Gott, gegründet;
Dein Licht lass uns helle werden,
Das Herz uns werd entzündet
In rechter Lieb des Glaubens dein,²⁸
Bis an das End beständig sein.
Die Welt lass immer murren.**

**Heaven and also earth,
Lord God, you have created;
Let your light [of the gospel] grow bright³² for us,
May our heart grow aflame
In proper love of your faith,
[And so that our heart] may be steadfast [in Christian
faith] until the end.³³
Let the world forever murmur [against your gospel].**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)

Auferstehung Jesu Christi von den Toten" ("Praised be God, and the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in accordance with his great mercy has begotten us again/anew, unto a living hope, by the resurrection of [the crucified] Jesus Christ from the dead").

²⁸Most hymnbooks of Bach's day gave "Lieb des Glaubens dein" ("love of your faith"), but some gave "Lieb des Glaubens rein" ("love of pure faith").

²⁹The word "Anschlag" had a wide variety of meanings in older German. In this line, "Anschläge" apparently signifies "designs," "intentions" (i.e., "Anschläge" that can be good or evil), used as a sort of synonym for the "Gedanken" ("thoughts") of the previous line.

³⁰In modern German, "fechten" refers to fencing, but in older German it was also, among other uses, a synonym for "streiten" in its sense of "to fight." The Luther Bibles of Bach's day used forms of "fechten" in this way in 1 Corinthians 9:26 and 15:32.

³¹"Trauen" is apparently being used here in one of its older-German meanings, as a synonym for "wagen" in its sense of "to put stock in."

³²This "light" that becomes "bright" is Jesus, associated in 2 Corinthians 4:4 with "das helle Licht des Evangelii" ("the bright light of the gospel").

³³This line derives its sense from Mark 13:13, "Wer aber beharrt bis an das Ende, der wird selig" ("But whoever perseveres [in Christian faith] until the end [of one's state of moral probation], he will become blessed [with eternal salvation]").



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