

“Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben!” BWV 109

1. *Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben!*¹

1. *I have faith, dear Lord; help my faithlessness.*²

2. Des Herren Hand ist ja noch nicht verkürzt,
Mir kann geholfen werden.
Ach nein, ich sinke schon zur Erden
Vor Sorge, dass sie mich zu Boden stürzt.
Der Höchste will, sein Vaterherze bricht.
Ach nein! er hört die Sünder nicht.
Er wird, er muss dir bald zu helfen eilen,
Um deine Not zu heilen.
Ach nein, es bleibet mir um Trost sehr bange;
Ach Herr, wie lange?

2. The [saving³ power of the] hand of the Lord, indeed still,⁴
is not curtailed;
I can be helped.⁵
Ah, no; I am surely⁶ dying with fear/shame⁷
From [such a burden of] care that it casts me to the ground.
The Most High⁸ wishes [to help]; his paternal heart⁹ breaks.
Ah, no! He does not hear the sinners [crying for help].¹⁰
He will, he must soon hasten to help you,
In order to heal your affliction.
Ah, no; I remain very anxious about [receiving] consolation;
Ah, Lord, how long?

3. Wie zweifelhaftig ist mein Hoffen,

3. How fraught with doubt¹¹ is my hope;¹²

¹Mark 9:24.

²The Calov Bible, which Bach owned, prints this challenging verse (see fn. 1, above) as follows, with Calov’s commentary indicated parenthetically: “Ich glaube (wiewohl in grosser Schwachheit), lieber HERR; hilf meinem Unglauben (meinem schwachen Glauben, der fast gar ein Unglaube zu achten ist!)” (“I have faith [albeit in great deficiency of strength], dear LORD; help my faithlessness [my very weak faith, which is to be regarded almost completely as faithlessness]”).

³With regard to the saving power of “the hand of the Lord,” see the quotation of Isaiah 59:1a in fn. 4, below.

⁴This line is responding to the prominent question posed by God to Moses in Numbers 11:23, “Ist denn die Hand des HERRN verkürzt?” (“Is the [power of] the hand of the LORD curtailed?”). Another passage that resonates with this line is Isaiah 59:1a, “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]”). The sense here is that doubts of the kind expressed in the opening movement’s scriptural text do not exclude the believer from salvation.

⁵With regard to the helping/saving power of “the hand of the Lord,” see the text of Isaiah 59:1a in fn. 4, above.

⁶“Schon” is used here apparently not in its usual sense of “already,” but in one of its older-German senses, namely as a synonym for “gewiss” (“certainly,” “surely”).

⁷The older-German phrase “in die Erde sinken” or “in die Erde versinken” (literally, “to sink to/into the earth”) was an equivalent of the English expressions “to [figuratively] die of fear” or “to die of shame.” The sense of “Sorge” as “shame” is referenced in line 2 of movement 6, and its sense as “fear” in the last line of movement 3.

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

⁹“Vaterherz” (“paternal heart,” i.e., the tender heart of a father toward his children) is a parallel to the more common concept “Mutterherz” (“maternal heart”).

¹⁰Isaiah 59:1b (see also the text of Isaiah 59:1a in fn. 4, above), in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, reads “und seine Ohren sind nicht dicke worden, dass er nicht höre” (“and his [God’s] ears are not become swollen [such] that he may not hear [people’s cries for help]”).

¹¹“Zweifelhaftig” (“fraught with doubt”) was an old-fashioned alternative for “zweifelhaft” (the latter is employed in line 1 of movement 4).

¹²“Mein Hoffen” (in modern German, technically, “my hoping”), here, is an alternative expression for “meine Hoffnung” (“my hope”). Compare, e.g., the opening lines of Bach’s Cantata 82: “Ich habe genug, / Ich habe den Heiland, das Hoffen der

Wie wanket mein geängstigt Herz!
Des Glaubens Docht glimmt kaum hervor,
Es bricht dies fast zustossne Rohr,
Die Furcht macht stetig neuen Schmerz.

How my distressed heart¹³ wavers [in faith]!
The wick of faith barely glimmers forth;
This nearly bruised reed breaks;¹⁴
Fear constantly creates new pain.

4. O fasse dich, du zweifelhafter Mut,
Weil Jesus itzt noch Wunder tut!
Die Glaubensaugen werden schauen
Das Heil des Herrn;
Scheint die Erfüllung allzufern,
So kannst du doch auf die Verheissung bauen.

4. O pull yourself together [in faith], you doubt-fraught
disposition,
Because Jesus is, still now, performing wonders.¹⁵
The eyes of faith will [come to] behold
The salvation [that arises] of the Lord;
If the fulfillment [of salvation] appears to be all too far off,
You can nonetheless build/rely upon the promise.

Frommen, / Auf meine begierigen Arme genommen” (“I have enough; / I have taken the savior, the hope of the pious, / Into my eager arms”).

¹³A “distressed heart” is biblically said to be pleasing to God. Psalm 51:19, in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, reads “Die Opfer, die Gott gefallen, sind ein geängster Geist: ein geängstes und zuschlagen Herz wirst du, Gott, nicht verachten” (“The offerings that please God are [not burnt animal sacrifices but] a distressed spirit: a distressed and shattered heart, God, you will not despise”). Thus the spiritual peril for this cantata poem’s narrator is not that his heart is distressed—it is considered “safe” to have a distressed heart—but that his heart “wavers [in faith].”

¹⁴These lines make somewhat convoluted use of the (already somewhat challenging) language of Matthew 12:20, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Das zustossene Rohr wird er nicht zerbrechen, und das glimmende Tocht wird er nicht auslöschten, bis dass er ausführe das Gericht zum Sieg” (“The bruised [i.e., cracked] reed will he [God’s servant, Jesus] not [completely] break, and the glimmering wick will he not snuff out, until he may conduct justice to [its—i.e., justice’s] victory”).

¹⁵That is, those of a doubt-fraught disposition may look to “wonders” as a warrant for having faith. This line alludes to John 4:48 (part of the gospel portion chanted at the liturgical occasion for which this cantata was written), where Jesus says, in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Wenn ihr nicht Zeichen und Wunder sehet, so glaubet ihr nicht” (“Unless you may see signs and wonders [from me, God’s son], then you may not [come to] believe [in me; i.e., have Christian faith]”).

5. Der Heiland kennet ja die Seinen,
Wenn ihre Hoffnung hülflos liegt.
Wenn Fleisch und Geist in ihnen streiten,
So steht er ihnen selbst zur Seiten,
Damit zuletzt der Glaube siegt.

5. Indeed the savior knows those who are his
When their hope lies helpless.
When flesh and spirit contend within them,
Then he himself stands at their side,
So that faith triumphs in the end.

**6. Wer hofft in Gott und dem vertraut,
Der wird nimmer zuschanden;
Denn wer auf diesen Felsen baut,
Ob ihm gleich geht zuhanden
Viel Unfalls hie, hab ich doch nie
Den Menschen sehen fallen,
Der sich verlässt auf Gottes Trost;
Er hilft sein'n Gläubgen allen.¹⁶**

**6. Whoever hopes in God and trusts in him,
He [that person] will never be put to shame;¹⁷
For—whoever builds [his spiritual house]¹⁸ upon this rock [Jesus]¹⁹
Even if manifestly²⁰ a host of misfortune
Meets him [the builder] here [on earth]—I have never
Indeed seen the person fall
Who relies upon God's consolation;
It/he [this rock, Jesus] helps/saves all his that have [the true] faith.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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¹⁶A stanza of “Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt.”

¹⁷“Etwas zuschanden machen” or “etwas zu Schanden machen,” in modern German, can mean “to wreck something” or “to bring something to harm,” which might suggest that the hymn line “Der wird nimmer zuschanden” would mean “He will never come to harm.” But the language and sense of this line is derived from Psalm 31:1, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “HERR, auf dich traue ich, lass mich nimmermehr zuschanden werden” (“LORD, in you I trust; let me never be put to shame” [i.e., the underlying Hebrew word here connotes “shame,” not “harm”]); note also here that “nimmermehr,” in the older German of this Psalm rendering does not mean “nevermore” in the sense of “never again” or “no longer,” but in the sense of “never, ever.” With regard to biblical use of “zuschanden,” see also fn. 19, below.

¹⁸This line conflates, for purposes of spiritual application, the language of Matthew 7:24 and 16:18. In the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, the first passage reads, “Wer diese meine Rede hört und tut sie, den vergleiche ich einem klugen Mann, der sein Haus auf einen Felsen baut” (“[And Jesus said:] Whoever hears this saying of mine and puts it into practice, him [will] I liken unto a wise man who builds his house upon a rock”); and the second passage reads “Du bist Petrus, und auf diesen Felsen will ich bauen meine Gemeinde” (“[I, Jesus, say to you, the disciple Simon:] You are [to be called] Peter [i.e., whose name means ‘rock’], and upon this rock will I build my congregation”). “Auf etwas/jemanden bauen” can be used as an equivalent phrase for “sich auf etwas/jemanden verlassen” (“to rely upon something/someone”), the expression that is employed in the penultimate line of this hymn stanza. For an additional use of “auf etwas bauen” in this libretto, see the last line of movement 4.

¹⁹Understood as a typological fulfillment of Exodus 17:6, Jesus is a number of times in the New Testament called a “rock.” The passage most resonant with the present cantata lines is Romans 9:33, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Ich lege in Zion ... einen Fels der Ärgernis; und wer an ihn gläubet, der soll nicht zuschanden werden” (“I [God] lay in Zion ... a rock of offense; and whoever has faith in it/him [this rock, Jesus], he [whoever trusts in Jesus] shall not be put to shame”).

²⁰The adverb “zuhanden” is employed here in its older-German sense as a synonym for “greifbar” (literally, “able to be grasped [with a hand]”), in its sense of “tangibly” or “manifestly” (i.e., from the classical Latin “manifestus” [“caught in the act,” “unmistakable”]; the word “manifestus” is thought most probably to have been constructed from “manus” [“hand”] together with “-festus” [whose meaning is now uncertain]).