

“Ich armer Mensch, ich Sündenknecht” BWV 55

1. Ich armer Mensch, ich Sündenknecht,
Ich geh vor Gottes Angesichte
Mit Furcht und Zittern zum Gerichte.
Er ist gerecht, ich ungerecht.
Ich armer Mensch, ich Sündenknecht!

1. I, wretched person, I, servant of sin,
I go before God's countenance
Unto judgment, with fear and trembling.
He is righteous, I [am] unrighteous.
I, wretched person, I, servant of sin!

2. Ich habe wider Gott gehandelt
Und bin demselben Pfad,
Den er mir vorgeschrieben hat,
Nicht nachgewandelt.
Wohin? Soll ich der Morgenröte Flügel
Zu meiner Flucht erkiesen,
Die mich zum letzten Meere wiesen,
So wird mich doch die Hand des Allerhöchsten
finden
Und mir die Sündenrute binden.
Ach ja!

2. I have acted against God
And have not followed¹
The same path
That he has prescribed for me.
Where to? If, for my escape [from God's wrath], I shall choose
The “rosy-fingered/winged dawn”²—
[Whose fingers] would point me to the outermost sea³—
Then the hand of [God] the Most High will indeed find me
And bundle the rod of [the punishment of] sin⁴ for [smiting] me.
Ah, yes;
Even if the netherworld had a bed⁵

¹“Nachwandeln” (literally, “to walk after”) is an older-German word that in Bach's day and earlier was typically used only in religious discourse, as a synonym for “Gott aufrichtig dienen” (“to serve God sincerely/devoutly”). The full sense of lines 2–4 is more specifically derived from Luther's uses of the words “Weg” (“way,” “path”) and “nachwandeln” (“to follow”) in his rendering of Deuteronomy 11:26-28, “Siehe, ich lege euch heute für den Segen, und den Fluch: den Segen, so ihr gehorchet den Geboten des HERRN eures Gottes; ... den Fluch aber, so ihr ... abtretet von dem Wege, den ich euch heute gebiete, dass ihr andern Göttern nachwandelt” (“Look, I [Moses] set before you [Israelites] today the blessing [of God], and the curse [of God]: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God; ... but the curse, if you ... should tread off the way/path that I command you today, so that you follow [the ways/paths of] other gods”).

²This line derives much of its sense from Psalm 139:8b-9a, “Nähme ich Flügel der Morgenröte ... so bist du auch da” (“Might [in escape] I take [the] ‘wings of the aurora’ [literally, ‘wings of the morning's redness’; i.e., the pinions of cloud that appear to lift dawn into the sky], ... then you [LORD] are even there [to find me]”). In using the otherwise puzzling verb “weisen” (“to point”), however, the cantata poetry seems also to draw on well-known “finger” imagery of the ancient Roman goddess Aurora, the personification of dawn, who is depicted in classical mythology as rising with rosy fingers from the saffron-colored bed of Tithonus. Benjamin Hederich's *Gründliches Lexicon Mythologicum* (Leipzig, 1724), a standard reference work in Bach's day, says of the goddess Aurora, via descriptions cited from Homer, Virgil, and others, “Sie wird gebildet als ein angenehmes Frauenzimmer mit rosenfarbenen Fingern” (“She is portrayed as a pleasant lady with rose-colored fingers”). Thus in the cantata libretto, dawn's “wings” would carry the sinner for his escape, while at the same time dawn's “fingers” would direct him where to go.

³This line derives its sense from Psalm 139:9b, “bliebe [ich] am äussersten Meer” (“might [I, in my escape,] remain/dwell in the [farthest islands of the] outermost sea [i.e., at the extreme west on this (flat) earth]”).

⁴This line draws on language from Psalm 89:30-33 in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, “Wo aber seine Kinder mein Gesetz verlassen, ... so will ich ihre Sünde mit der Rute heimsuchen” (“But if his [King David of Israel's] children forsake my law, ... then will I [God] visit [i.e., punish] their sin with the [smiting of the] rod”).

⁵It may seem strange that the text suggests that there is a bed in the netherworld for the sinner to hide in, but lines 11–13 draw on Psalm 139:8, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Führe ich gen Himmel, so bist du da; bettete ich mir in die Hölle, siehe, so bist du auch da” (“Might I go toward [the heights of] heaven [to escape], then you [LORD] are there [to find me]; might I lay my bed into the netherworld [to hide], look, then you [LORD] are even there”). Note that the psalm's “Himmel” and “Höll” refer not to the

Wenn gleich die Höll ein Bette
Vor mich und meine Sünden hätte,
So wäre doch der Grimm des Höchsten da.
Die Erde schützt mich nicht,
Sie droht mich Scheusal zu verschlingen;
Und will ich mich zum Himmel schwingen,
Da wohnet Gott, der mir das Urteil spricht.

3. Erbarme dich!
Lass die Tränen dich erweichen,
Lass sie dir zu⁷ Herzen reichen;⁸
Lass um Jesu Christi willen
Deinen Zorn des Eifers⁹ stillen!
Erbarme dich!

4. Erbarme dich!
Jedoch nun
Tröst ich mich,
Ich will nicht für Gerichte stehen
Und lieber vor dem Gnadenthron
Zu meinem frommen Vater gehen.
Ich halt ihm seinen Sohn,
Sein Leiden, sein Erlösen¹¹ für,

For me and my sins [to hide in],
Then, indeed, the wrath of the Most High would be there [to find me].
The earth does not protect me;
It threatens to swallow up [wicked] me, an object of horror [to God];⁶
And if I wish to vault myself to the [heights of] heaven,
[Then] God, who pronounces my verdict, dwells there [and will find me].

3. [God,] have mercy.
Let my tears mollify you;
Let them reach to your heart;
Let, for the sake of Jesus Christ,
The anger of your jealousy¹⁰ subside.
Have mercy.

4. Have mercy.
Yet now
I console myself
[That] I will not stand for judgment [to be condemned]
But rather go before the throne of grace,
Unto [God] my upright¹⁴ father.
I hold up before him [the saving work of] his son,
His [Jesus's] suffering [on the cross], his redeeming [of sinners],

eternal heaven and hell of the afterlife but to the temporal netherworld and firmament, and that its “führe ich” is a subjunctive form of “fahre ich.”

⁶The Bible on a number of occasions tells of “the earth” having “opened” (or, “opened its mouth”) to “swallow up” wicked people.

⁷Bach’s own materials give both “dir ans Herzen” and “dir zu Herzen,” both of which mean “reach to your heart.” A 1728 book of printed librettos gives the likewise synonymous “dir ans Herzen.”

⁸The 1728 book of printed librettos gives two additional lines between lines 3 and 4: “[M]eine Sünden reuen mich, / [E]rbarme dich!” (“I repent my sins, / Have mercy”).

⁹The 1728 book of printed librettos and Bach’s original performing part gives “Zorn und Eifer” (“anger and jealousy”).

¹⁰“Deinen Zorn des Eifers” is sometimes rendered as “the zeal of your anger,” but the more accurate rendering here would be “the anger of your zeal.” Further, the word “Eifer” here, applied to God, means not simply “zeal” (or “fervor”) but, more specifically, “jealousy.” The Bible often speaks of God being “jealous,” most pointedly in Deuteronomy 4:24, “Der HERR, dein Gott, ist ein eifriger Gott” (“The LORD, your God, is a jealous God”). This “jealousy” of God’s against the infidelity of those who disobeyed him or otherwise sinned against him was understood as analogous to the jealous and impassioned indignation of a marriage partner whose spouse is unfaithful. “Zorn” and “Eifer” are often mentioned together in the Luther Bibles.

¹¹The 1728 book of printed librettos gives “Leiden und Erlösen” (“suffering and redeeming”).

¹⁴“Fromm” often meant “pious,” but the word also had a variety of other meanings in older German. When attributed to God, it meant “upright,” as e.g. in Deuteronomy 32:4-6, where God is also spoken of as a “father” of his people: “Treu ist Gott und kein Böses in ihm; gerecht und fromm ist er. ... Ist er nicht dein Vater und dein HERR?” (“God is faithful and [there is] nothing wicked in him; righteous and upright is he. ... Is he not your father and your LORD?”).

Wie er für meine Schuld
Bezahlet und genug getan,
Und bitt ihn um Geduld,
Hinfüro¹² will ichs nicht mehr tun.
So nimmt¹³ mich Gott zu Gnaden wieder an.

**5. Bin ich gleich von dir gewichen,
Stell ich mich doch wieder ein;
Hat uns doch dein Sohn verglichen
Durch sein Angst und Todespein.
Ich verleugne nicht die Schuld,
Aber deine Gnad und Huld
Ist viel grösser als die Sünde,**

How he has paid for my debt [of sin]
And made atonement,¹⁵
And [I] ask him [God] for patience [with me];
Henceforth will I not do it [serve sin]¹⁶ anymore.
In this way, God accepts me again unto grace.

**5. Though I have turned aside¹⁹ from you,
I do, indeed, come back;
Your son has indeed reconciled²⁰ [the ledger] for us
By his fear and [by his] death pang[s] [on the cross].²¹
I do not disavow my debt;
But your grace and favor
Is much greater than the sin
That I constantly find within me.**

¹²“Hinfort” (“henceforth”) would have been the word ordinarily used together with “nicht mehr” (“not anymore”), but its older-German synonym “hinfüro” was employed here to accommodate the poetry’s scansion.

¹³The 1728 book of printed librettos possibly gives this as a command: “So nimm mich Gott zu Gnaden wieder an” (“God, in this way, accept me again unto grace”). But it may simply be a typographical error, given that there is no exclamation mark at the end of the sentence, as would normally be employed with commands in German.

¹⁵The 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.)

¹⁶The potentially puzzling “it” here refers to “serving sin.” This cantata line draws on Romans 6:6, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “unser alter Mensch samt ihm gekreuzigt ist, ... dass wir hinfort [a synonym for ‘hinfüro’—see fn. 12, above] der Sünde nicht dienen” (“our Old Adam [the sinful person per se, tainted by sin as inherited from the first man, Adam] is crucified along with him [Jesus, the sinless and sin-forgiving New Adam], ... so that henceforth we should not serve sin”). With regard to being a “servant of sin,” see also the last line in movement 1.

¹⁹This line draws on Daniel 9:5, “wir sind von deinen Geboten und Rechten gewichen” (“[LORD,] we have turned aside from your commandments and laws”).

²⁰“Vergleichen” (past tense, “verglichen”), here, is an archaic synonym for “ausgleichen” in its sense of “to balance” or “to reconcile” (e.g., a ledger).

²¹“Todespein” (literally, “death’s pain”)—usually expressed in the plural as “Todesschmerzen” (“pangs/pains of death”)—here is understood to be a type of evil “force.” Luther argued that Jesus’s sacrificial, atoning death on the cross was a victorious passing in which Jesus, as true God and human being, had experienced fully the pains of the evil cosmic power of Death itself (that is, as opposed to Jesus’s simply having experienced such great physical agonies that he died from them). This view was expressed in Luther’s commentary on Acts 2:24, which says of Jesus, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Den hat Gott auferwecket, und aufgelöset die Schmerzen des Todes” (“God [the father] has raised him [God the son] up [from the dead], having loosed the pains of death”).

Die ich stets bei mir¹⁷ befinde.¹⁸

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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¹⁷In the original sources there are both trivial inconsistencies and serious mistakes in the wording here that are incorrectly reported on in the scholarly Bach literature. Bach's own score gives nothing more than the first few words of line 1, and he had two assistant copyists write out the vocal performing parts and supply for them the whole of the stanza's text. Copyist 1 illogically wrote "bei dir" ("within you") in the soprano part, which was corrected by someone to "bei mir" ("within me"), and he likewise wrote "bei dir" in the tenor part (uncorrected), but wrote "in mir" (the reading in some modern editions, synonymous with "bei mir") in the bass part. Copyist 2 wrote "bei mir" in the alto part. The 1728 book of printed librettos gives "in mir."

¹⁸A stanza of "Werde munter, mein Gemüte."