

"Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan" BWV 99

**1. Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan,  
Es bleibt gerecht sein Wille;  
Wie er fängt meine Sachen an,  
Will ich ihm halten stille.  
Er ist mein Gott,  
Der in der Not  
Mich wohl weiss zu erhalten;  
Drum lass ich ihn nur walten.**

2. Sein Wort der Wahrheit stehet fest  
Und wird mich nicht betrügen,  
Weil es die Gläubigen nicht fallen noch verderben lässt.  
Ja, weil es mich den Weg zum Leben führet,  
So fasst mein Herze sich und lässt sich begnügen  
An Gottes Vatern und Huld  
Und hat Geduld,  
Wenn mich ein Unfall rühret.  
Gott kann mit seinen Allmachtshänden  
Mein Unglück wenden.

3. Erschüttere dich nur nicht, verzagte Seele,  
Wenn dir der Kreuzeskelch so bitter schmeckt!  
Gott ist dein weiser Arzt und Wundermann,  
So dir kein tödlich Gift einschenken kann,  
Obgleich die Süßigkeit verborgen steckt.

**1. What God does is done well;  
His will remains righteous.  
However he dispatches<sup>1</sup> my affairs  
I will keep still before him.  
He is my God,  
Who in [times of] distress  
Knows well how to preserve me;  
That is why I just let him rule.**

2. His word of truth stands fast  
And will not deceive me,  
Because it lets believers neither fall nor perish.  
Yes, because it [God's word] leads me on the path to  
[eternal] life,<sup>2</sup>  
My heart composes itself and contents itself  
With God's paternal faithfulness and favor,  
And has patience  
When any mishap strikes<sup>3</sup> me.  
God can, with his Almighty hands,<sup>4</sup>  
Turn my misfortune around.

3. Only do not shake yourself up, despondent soul,  
When the "cup"<sup>5</sup> of [bearing] the cross<sup>6</sup> tastes so bitter to  
you.  
God is your wise physician and man of miracles,

GENERAL NOTE: Movements 1 and 6 take their texts verbatim from the outer stanzas of the hymn "Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan." The remaining movements paraphrase stanzas 2 through 5.

<sup>1</sup>The verb "anfängen" here does not mean "to begin" or "to commence"; in older German, the phrase "meine Sachen anfängen" can be used in the place of "meine Sachen verrichten" ("to dispatch my affairs")

<sup>2</sup>The "Weg zum Leben" here is "the path to eternal life." In Matthew 7:14, the *strait path leads to life*: "die Pforte ist eng, und der Weg ist schmal, der zum Leben führt" ("the gate is narrow and the path is strait [or, 'constricted'] that leads to [eternal] life"). In Bach's cantata, however, God's *word of truth* leads *the believer on the path to life*—i.e., "mich den Weg" is to be understood as "mich [auf] den Weg" ("me on the path"). This line in the cantata is an adaptation of the third line of the second stanza from the title hymn "Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan," which reads "Er führet mich auf rechter Bahn" ("He [God] leads me on the right course").

<sup>3</sup>The verb "rühren" is being used here as a synonym for "treffen" in the sense of "to strike/hit." The word is used this way in Job 19:21, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Erbarmt euch mein, ihr meine Freunde, denn die Hand Gottes hat mich gerührt" ("Pity me, you my friends, for the hand of God has struck me"). Job 5:19 uses similar language about the hand of God, likewise employing the verb "rühren." The next line of the cantata speaks of God's hands doing the *opposite* of what Job 19 relates.

<sup>4</sup>"Seinen Allmachtshänden" suggests the meaning "his Almighty [divine] hands" rather than simply "his almighty [all-powerful] hands" (note that "seinen allmächtigen Händen" was a common expression for "his [God's] all-powerful hands").

<sup>5</sup>A figurative meaning of "Kelch" in German, just as with "cup" in English, stems from its figurative usage in the Bible, where one's lot or experience (especially adverse) and divine allotments (especially unfavorable), are likened to a cup that God presents one to drink from. The most famous use in Bach's milieu was what Jesus says in John 18:11, expressing (in this gospel, at least) no hesitation about his crucifixion, "Soll ich den Kelch nicht trinken, den mir mein Vater gegeben hat?" ("Shall I not drink the cup that [God] my father has given me?")

<sup>6</sup>"Kreuz" here means the suffering of metaphorically bearing/enduring the cross, as Jesus did literally. In the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, Jesus says in Luke 14:27, "Wer nicht sein Kreuz trägt und mir nachfolget, der kann nicht mein Jünger sein" ("Whoever does not bear his cross and follow me, he cannot be my disciple").

Who could never pour you any deadly [medicinal]  
poison,  
Though the [expected disguising] sweetness is hidden.<sup>7</sup>

4. Nun der von Ewigkeit geschlossene Bund  
Bleibt meines Glaubens Grund.  
Er spricht mit Zuversicht,  
Im Tod und Leben:  
Gott ist mein Licht,  
Ihm will ich mich ergeben.  
Und haben alle Tage  
Gleich ihre eigne Plage,  
Doch auf das überstandne Leid,  
Wenn man genug geweinet,  
Kommt endlich die Errettungszeit,  
Da Gottes treuer Sinn erscheint.

4. Now the covenant [with God], entered into from eternity,  
Remains the foundation of my faith.  
It declares with confidence,  
In death and life:  
God is my light,  
I will give myself over to him.  
And if all days alike  
Have their own vexation,<sup>8</sup>  
Yet, upon endured suffering,  
When one has wept enough,  
The time of deliverance finally comes,  
When God's faithful disposition is manifested.

5. Wenn des Kreuzes Bitterkeiten  
Mit des Fleisches Schwachheit streiten,  
Ist es dennoch wohlgetan.  
Wer das Kreuz durch falschen Wahn  
Sich vor unerträglich schätzt,  
Wird auch künftig nicht ergötzet.

When the bitternesses of [bearing] the cross<sup>9</sup>  
Clash with the weakness of the flesh,  
It [God's will] is nonetheless well done.  
Whoever through false presumption  
Reckons the cross as unbearable,  
Will not be delighted in future either.

**6. Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan,  
Dabei will ich verbleiben.  
Es mag mich auf die rauhe Bahn  
Not, Tod und Elend treiben,  
So wird Gott mich  
Ganz väterlich  
In seinen Armen halten;  
Drum lass ich ihn nur walten.**

**6. What God does is done well —  
I will abide by this;  
If distress, death, and sorrow may  
Drive me on the rough course [of life],  
Then God will,  
Most paternally,  
Hold me in his arms;  
That is why I just let him rule.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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<sup>7</sup>This clumsy German poetry concerns an inversion of the time-honored notion that “a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.” Just as honey or sugar can mask the swallowing of a bitter medicine (an expected situation), a severely bitter medicine can hide sweetness (unlikely). In line with the Lutheranism of Bach's day, which was fond of the idea that theologically positive things are hidden under their opposites (the quintessential example being the apparent ignominy of the crucifixion of Jesus), the “cup” of cross-bearing is likened to the drinking of medicinal poison whose disguised sweetness is hidden within.

<sup>8</sup>This language is derived from Matthew 6:34, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Darum sorget nicht für den andern Morgen, denn der morgende Tag wird für das seine sorgen; es ist genug, dass ein jeglicher Tag seine eigene Plage hat” (“Therefore worry not about the next tomorrow, for the day tomorrow will worry about its own [business]; it is enough that each single day has its own vexation”).

<sup>9</sup>See fn. 6 above.