

“Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht mit deinem Knecht” BWV 105

1. Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht mit deinem Knecht. Denn vor dir wird kein Lebendiger gerecht.<sup>1</sup>

1. Lord, do not enter into judgment with [me] your servant. For before you no living person will be righteous.

2. Mein Gott, verwirf mich nicht,  
Indem ich mich in Demut vor dir beuge,  
Von deinem Angesicht.  
Ich weiss, wie gross dein Zorn und mein Verbrechen ist,  
Dass du zugleich ein schneller Zeuge  
Und ein gerechter Richter bist.  
Ich lege dir ein frei Bekenntnis dar  
Und stürze mich nicht in Gefahr,  
Die Fehler meiner Seelen  
Zu leugnen, zu verhehlen!

2. My God, do not cast me,  
In that I bow before you in humility,  
Away from your countenance.  
I know how great your anger and my evil-doing is;  
I know that you are simultaneously a swift testifier [against sin]  
And a righteous judge.<sup>2</sup>  
To you I make a free acknowledgment [of my guilt],  
And I do not plunge myself into [the] danger  
Of denying, of hiding,  
The faults of my soul.

3. Wie zittern und wanken  
Der Sünder Gedanken,  
Indem sie sich untereinander verklagen  
Und wiederum sich zu entschuldigen wagen.  
So wird ein geängstigt Gewissen  
Durch eigene Folter zerrissen.

3. How the thoughts of sinners  
Tremble and waver,  
In that they [one’s thoughts] accuse one another  
And venture in turn to excuse themselves.  
In this way an anxious conscience  
Is torn apart by its own torment.

4. Wohl aber dem, der seinen Bürgen weiss,  
Der alle Schuld ersetzt,  
So wird die Handschrift ausgetan,  
Wenn Jesus sie mit Blute netzet.  
Er heftet sie ans Kreuze selber an,

4. But how well it is with him who knows of his guarantor  
Who makes good all debt;  
The promissory note<sup>3</sup> [for debt/fault/guilt] is thus canceled  
When Jesus inundates<sup>4</sup> it with [the “ink” of his] blood.  
He himself affixes it [the promissory note] to the cross;

<sup>1</sup>Psalm 143:2, except that in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day the second sentence reads “Denn vor dir *ist* kein Lebendiger gerecht” (“For before you no living person *is* righteous”). The future tense (“wird”) points to the Christian belief in a final judgment at the end time.

<sup>2</sup>The one who utters these lines knows that God is “a swift testifier [against sin]” (“ein schneller Zeuge”) from this verbatim expression in Malachi 3:5 and that God is “the righteous judge” (“der gerechte Richter”) from this verbatim expression in 2 Timothy 4:8.

<sup>3</sup>One of the uses of the expression “die Handschrift” (“the manuscript”; or, “the handwriting”) in older German was as a synonym for “Schuldbrief” (“borrower’s note”). “Handschrift” is the Luther Bible’s rendering of the word “cheirographon” in Colossians 2:14, the term for any document written in one’s own hand as a proof of obligation, as for example a note of indebtedness, an I.O.U. The bond that lies to humanity’s charge because of its debt (of sin) to God—associated in Colossians with the Law of Moses understood as a “Schuldregister” (“list of debts”)—was said to be canceled by virtue of the I.O.U.’s having been set aside through humans’ identification (by faith) with Jesus’s vicarious death on the cross. This movement of Bach’s cantata derives much of its language from Colossians 2:13-14, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Er hat uns geschenkt alle Sünde und ausgetilgt die Handschrift, ... und hat sie ... an das Kreuz geheftet” (“He [God/Jesus] has remitted us all sin and blotted out the promissory note and affixed it to the cross [where it is deluged with the blood of Jesus]”).

<sup>4</sup>“Netzen” simply means “to make wet.” The clumsy use here of the verb “netzet” was dictated by the need for a rhyme with “ersetzt.” Before ink on paper dries it is, of course, wet. The wet blood-ink of Jesus is understood to blot out the debtor’s dried handwriting on the promissory note (see fn. 3, above).

Er wird von deinen Gütern, Leib und Leben,  
Wenn deine Sterbestunde schlägt,  
Dem Vater selbst die Rechnung übergeben.  
So mag man deinen Leib, den man zum Grabe trägt,  
Mit Sand und Staub beschütten,  
Dein Heiland öffnet dir die ewgen Hütten.

The reckoning of your goods, life and limb,<sup>5</sup>  
He will, when the hour of death strikes,  
Himself deliver to [God] the father.  
Though your body that is carried to the grave  
May have sand<sup>6</sup> and dust poured over it,  
Your savior opens to you the eternal habitations [for your soul].<sup>7</sup>

5. Kann ich nur Jesum mir zum Freunde machen,  
So gilt der Mammon nichts bei mir.  
Ich finde kein Vergnügen hier  
Bei dieser eitlen Welt und<sup>8</sup> irdschen Sachen.

5. If I can only make Jesus my friend,  
Then mammon counts for nothing with me.  
I find no pleasure here  
In this vain world and [in] earthly things.

**6. Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stillen  
Mein Gewissen, das mich plagt.  
Es wird deine Treu erfüllen,  
Was du selber hast gesagt:  
Dass auf dieser weiten Erden  
Keiner soll verloren werden,  
Sondern ewig leben wohl,<sup>9</sup>  
Wenn er nur ist Glaubens voll.<sup>10</sup>**

**6. Now, I know, you will still  
My conscience that plagues me.  
Your faithfulness will fulfill  
What you yourself have said:  
That on this wide earth  
No one shall be lost,  
But rather shall fare well eternally,  
If only he is full of [Christian] faith.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R Melamed)

<sup>5</sup>“Leib und Leben” (literally, “body and life”) is the German equivalent of the phrase “life and limb.”

<sup>6</sup>“Sand” (and “Staub”/“dust”?) here may, in addition, refer metaphorically to “Streusand” (literally “strewing sand”; rendered as “writing-sand,” “writing-dust,” or “pin-dust” in older English), a special kind of sand used to dry wet ink after writing—the idea in the cantata being, then, that when Christians die, they are blot-dried like a newly penned document. In Bach’s Cantata 82, however, the notion of “sand” is simply “ich werde in dem Sande kühler Erde ruhn” (“I [my dead body] will rest in the sand of the cold earth”).

<sup>7</sup>This line derives its sense from Luke 16:9, “Machet euch Freunde mit dem ungerechten Mammon, auf dass, wenn ihr nun darbet, sie euch aufnehmen in die ewigen Hütten” (“Make yourselves friends [in Christ] by means of the [unavoidably] unrighteous mammon, so that now when you are [eventually] in want [because the mammon runs out], they [the friends—in heaven] may receive you into the eternal habitations”). The next movement of the cantata also concerns these sentiments about friendship, mammon, and this world versus the next.

<sup>8</sup>In modern editions the German text reads “Ich finde kein Vergnügen hier bei dieser eitlen Welt *in* irdschen Sachen” (“I find no pleasure here with this vain world *in* earthly things”). The early sources, however, read “Ich finde kein Vergnügen hier bei dieser eitlen Welt *und* irdschen Sachen” (“I find no pleasure here in this vain world *and* earthly things”).

<sup>9</sup>Bach’s score does not provide the text underlay for this movement. Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach, who inherited his father’s score, later wrote the text into its margin, apparently on the basis of the underlay in the now-lost original performing parts. The hymnals of Bach’s day differ a bit on the wording of this stanza. Modern editions of the cantata give the well-attested reading “ewig leben soll” (“[one] shall live eternally”) as the last words of line 7, but J.C.F. Bach provided “ewig leben wohl” (“[one shall] fare well eternally”), another well-attested reading.

<sup>10</sup>A stanza of “Jesu, der du meine Seele.”



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