

“Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben?” BWV 8

1. Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben?

**Meine Zeit läuft immer hin,
Und des alten Adams Erben,
Unter denen ich auch bin,
Haben dies zum Vaterteil,
Dass sie eine kleine Weil
Arm und elend sein auf Erden,
Und denn selber Erde werden.**

2. Was willst du dich, mein Geist, entsetzen,
Wenn meine letzte Stunde schlägt?
Mein Leib neigt täglich sich zur Erden,
Und da muss seine Ruhstatt werden,
Wohin man so viel tausend trägt.

1. Dearest God, when will I die?

**My time [on earth] ever hurries by,
And the heirs [in sin] of the Old Adam,¹
Among whom I, too, am one,
Have this as their patrimony:
That for a little while
They are poor and miserable on earth,
And then become [dust of] earth² themselves.**

2. My spirit, why will you fear/resist³
When my last hour strikes?
Daily my body inclines itself toward [its burial place,] the
earth;
And its place of rest must be there,
Where so many thousands are borne.⁴

GENERAL NOTE: Movements 1 and 6 take their texts verbatim from the two outer stanzas of the hymn “Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben?” The internal movements paraphrase other stanzas.

¹ “Des alten Adams Erben” means not “the old legacy of Adam” but “the heirs of Old Adam.” “Der alte Adam” (“the Old Adam”; or, “the Old [type of] Human”—the Hebrew word/name “adam” means “human being”) is a biblical-theological term that is contrasted in the New Testament with the biblical-theological term “der neue Mensch” (“the new human being”; or, “the New Adam”), used most prominently in Colossians 3:9-10, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Zieheth den alten Menschen mit seinen Werken aus und ziehet den neuen an” (“Put off the [fallen] ‘Old Adam’ and his [sinful] works and put on [as metaphorical clothing] the ‘New [Adam]—the sinless Jesus Christ’”). Further context for understanding this hymn line is provided by Romans 5:19, which proclaims that just as through the disobedience of the one man Adam (who ate forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden), people were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man Jesus (who was sacrificed on the cross), people will be made righteous. Also significant is 1 Corinthians 15:22, which proclaims that as “in Adam” all die, so “in Christ” all will be made alive. Through all of this, “sin” and “death” are linked, and in classical Western Christianity, the progeny of Adam (i.e., all of humankind) “inherit” Adam’s “corrupted essence”; in English this concept is usually referred to as “original sin” (i.e., “original” not in the sense of “innovative” or “uncliché” but of “that from which something is derived”), and in German the term for this is “die Erbsünde” (“the inherited [condition of] sin”).

² The language and sense of these lines is derived from Genesis 3:19, famously rendered in the King James Bible as “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou [Adam, and your progeny,] eat bread, till thou return unto the ground [Hebrew, ‘adamah’ (‘ground,’ ‘dirt,’ ‘land,’ ‘ashes,’ or ‘earth’)]; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust [Hebrew, ‘aphar’ (‘dry, loose earth,’ or ‘dust’)] thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” but which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Im Schweiss deines Angesichts sollt du dein Brot essen, bis dass du wieder zur Erden werdest, davon du genommen bist; denn du bist Erde und sollt zur Erden werden” (“By the sweat of your brow shall you eat your bread, until you would [at death] turn back into the [dust of] earth from which you were taken; for you are earth and shall turn [back] into the earth”). This all assumes knowledge of Genesis 2:7, famously rendered in the King James Bible as “And the Lord God [at creation in the garden of Eden] formed man of the dust [Hebrew, ‘aphar’] of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul,” but which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Und Gott der HERR machte den Menschen aus einem Erdenkloss, und blies ihm ein den lebendigen Odem in seine Nase; und also ward der Mensch eine lebendige Seele” (“And the LORD God made the human being [named ‘Adam’] out of a lump of earth, and blew in him, into his nose, the living breath [of God’s spirit]; and in this way the human being [Adam, and thus humankind,] became a living soul [i.e., a living being/person]”).

³ The usual sense of the reflexive form of “entsetzen” was “to [be beside oneself with] fear,” as in the common expression “sich vor dem Tode entsetzen” (“to be afraid/terrified of death”). Another, older-German sense of “sich entsetzen,” however, was its use as a synonym for “sich widersetzen” (“to resist”), and both senses do apply well here.

⁴ That is, pallbearers would carry the person’s body (to the grave, e.g., Luke 7:12), and angels would “carry” or “bear” the person’s soul (to heaven; e.g., Luke 16:22).

3. Zwar fühlt mein schwaches Herz
Furcht, Sorge,⁵ Schmerz;
Wo wird mein Leib die Ruhe finden?
Wer wird die Seele doch
Vom aufgelegten Sündenjoch
Befreien und entbinden?
Das Meine wird zerstreut,
Und wohin werden meine Lieben,
In ihrer Traurigkeit
Zertrennt,⁶ vertrieben?

4. Doch weichet, ihr tollern, vergeblichen Sorgen!
Mich rufet mein Jesus, wer sollte nicht gehn?
Nichts, was mir gefällt,
Besitzt die Welt.
Erscheine mir, seliger, fröhlicher Morgen,
Verkläret und herrlich vor Jesu zu stehn.

3. Truly my weak[-willed] heart feels
Fear, worry, pain;
Where will my body find its rest?
Who will yet free and unbind
My soul
From the yoke of sin laid upon it?⁷
What is mine will be scattered [among heirs and others];
And to where will my dear ones,
Broken up⁸ in their sadness [at my passing],
Be dispersed [from my deathbed]?⁹

4. Yet make way, you absurd,¹⁰ futile¹¹ worries;
My Jesus calls me; who would not go?
Nothing that the world possesses
Pleases me.
Appear, blessed, joyful [end-time] morning,
To me, [I who will be bodily] transfigured¹² and glorious

⁵ Singular “Sorge” (“worry”) in the surviving original materials of Bach’s, but plural “Sorgen” (“worries”) in later material and in some modern editions.

⁶ “Zertrennt” (in this context, “broken up”; see fn. 8, below) in the surviving original materials of Bach’s, but “zerstreut” (“scattered”) in later material and in some modern editions. All materials and the editions do read “zerstreut,” however, at the end of line 7 in this movement.

⁷ This line draws on significant “law” (as opposed to “gospel”) language from Acts 15:10, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Was versucht ihr denn nun GOTT mit auflegen des Jochs auf der Jünger Hälse, welches weder unsere Väter noch wir haben mügen tragen?” (“Now why then do you [apostles] tempt God with laying of the yoke [of the law of Moses] upon the neck of the [gentile] disciples [of Jesus], which neither our fathers [old Israel] nor we [Jewish disciples of Jesus] have been able to bear?”). In this view, the law of Moses is associated with sin, and the gospel of Jesus with (God’s) mercy/grace.

⁸ “Zertrennt” has a variety of meanings, but here it apparently is being used as in Luther’s rendering of Psalm 22:15, “Ich bin ausgeschüttet wie Wasser, alle meine Gebeine haben sich zertrennt” (“My life ebbs away [literally, ‘I am poured out like water’], I am broken up [literally, ‘all my bones have disjoined themselves’]”); consider also Sirach 22:25, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Wer seinen Freund schmäh, der zertrennt die Freundschaft” (“Whoever reviles his friend, he breaks up the friendship”).

⁹ Loved ones traditionally gathered around a person’s deathbed, and in Lutheranism this was considered additionally important and consequential, as it helped the person in the throes of death not to be tempted by last-minute (potentially damning) religious doubt. Upon the person’s dying, the loved ones would leave the deathbed and go on their ways.

¹⁰ “Toll” in modern German is a now slightly old-fashioned slang expression that is used in the same way as the slightly old-fashioned American slang expressions “crazy” and “awesome” for “extremely good.” But in older German it meant “crazy” in its standard more formal sense of “absurd” or “irrational.”

¹¹ “Vergeblich” means not “forgivable” (which would be “verzeihlich” in German) but “vain” or “futile.”

¹² “Verklären” (hyperliterally, “to make clear/bright”) had a variety of meanings generally and biblically. Here it is being used in the sense employed in Luther’s idiosyncratic rendering of Philippians 3:20-21, “Unser Wandel aber ist im Himmel, von dannen wir auch warten des Heilands Jesu Christi, des HERRN, welcher unsern nichtigen Leib verklären wird, dass er ähnlich werde seinem verklärten Leibe” (“Our [true] association, however, is in heaven, out from which we also expect the savior Jesus Christ [to return here to earth], the LORD, who [at the end time] will transfigure our transitory [earthly] body, so that it might be similar to his transfigured [heavenly] body”). Note that “Wandel” has a very wide variety of meanings both in

to stand before Jesus [the end-time judge].

5. Behalte nur, o Welt, das Meine!
Du nimmst ja selbst mein Fleisch und mein Gebeine,
So nimm auch meine Armut hin;
Genug, dass mir aus Gottes Überfluss,
Das höchste Gut noch¹³ werden muss,
Genug, dass ich dort reich und selig bin.
Was aber ist von mir zu erben,
Als meines Gottes Vätertreu?
Die wird ja alle Morgen neu,
Und kann nicht sterben.

**6. Herrscher über Tod und Leben,
Mach einmal mein Ende gut,
Lehre¹⁶ mich den Geist aufgeben
Mit recht wohlgefasstem Mut.
Hilf, dass ich ein ehrlich Grab
Neben frommen Christen hab,
Und auch endlich in der Erde
Nimmermehr zuschanden werde!**

5. Just keep, O world, what is mine.
You indeed receive my very flesh and my bones,
So receive my poverty as well;
[It is] enough that out of God's abundance
The highest good must yet come to me;
[It is] enough that there [in heaven] I am rich and blessed.
What else is to be inherited from me¹⁴
Than my God's paternal faithfulness?
It becomes indeed new every morning,
And cannot die.¹⁵

**6. Ruler over death and life:
Make, one day, my end good;
Teach me to give up my spirit [to Jesus]
With properly well-plucked courage.¹⁷
Help [me] that I may have an honorable grave
Alongside pious Christians,
And also at last, [buried] in the earth,
May nevermore be put to shame.¹⁸**

(transl. Michael Marissen & Daniel R. Melamed)



modern and in older German; here it is used in the sense of “Verkehr an einem Ort” (“dealings/association in one place”). Note also that this older German uses the genitive with “warten” (to achieve an elevated style), where modern German would simply use the accusative.

¹³ In the 1724 text booklets distributed to Bach's parishioners, this reads “dort” (“there”).

¹⁴ The phrase “von mir zu erben” means “to be inherited *from* me,” not “to be inherited *by* me.” This is clear from the original lines of the hymn that are being paraphrased: “[Ich] bescheide meinen Erben / Einen Gott, der kann nicht sterben” (“I bequeath my heirs / A God who cannot die”). Lutherans would take for granted that such bequeathals come not by any inherent goodness of the person but by the grace of God.

¹⁵ The last three lines take much of their language and sense from Lamentations 3:22-23, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, “Die Güte des HERRN ists, dass wir nicht gar aus sind; seine Barmherzigkeit hat noch kein Ende, sondern sie ist alle Morgen neu, und deine Treue ist gross.” (“It is [through] the goodness of the Lord [God] that we are not completely done for; his mercifulness, if anything, has no end; but it is new every morning, and great is your [i.e., God's] faithfulness”).

¹⁶ In the 1724 text booklets, this reads “lasse” (“allow”).

¹⁷ The sentiments of lines 3–4 apparently draw upon the narrative in Acts 7:54-60 where the “Hellenist” (Acts 6:1) leader Stephen boldly declares (at 7:59), while being stoned (to death) by the “Hebrew” (6:1) leaders, “HERR Jesu, nimm meinen Geist auf!” (“LORD Jesus, accept my spirit”).

¹⁸ “Etwas zuschanden machen” or “etwas zu Schanden machen,” in modern German, can mean “to wreck something” or “to bring something to harm.” The language and sense of this line, however, 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”]).

Scan or go to www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV8 for an annotated translation