

"Wer Dank opfert, der preiset mich" BWV 17

Erster Teil

Part 1

1. *Wer Dank opfert, der preiset mich, und das¹ ist der Weg, dass ich ihm zeige das Heil Gottes.²*

1. *Whoever offers thanks, he praises me [God]; and this is the way that I [Jesus]³ show him the salvation of God.*

2. Es muss die ganze Welt ein stummer Zeuge werden
Von Gottes hoher Majestät,
Luft, Wasser, Firmament und Erden,
Wenn ihre Ordnung als in Schnuren geht;
Ihn preiset die Natur mit ungezählten Gaben,
Die er ihr in den Schoss gelegt,
Und was den Odem hegt,
Will noch mehr Anteil an ihm haben,
Wenn es zu seinem Ruhm so Zung als Fittich regt.

2. The entire world [of nature] must become a mute witness
To God's high majesty:
Air, water, firmament, and earth,
As if their arrangement moves by puppet-string.⁴
Nature praises him by countless gifts
That he has placed in its bosom;⁵
And that which enjoys⁶ breath
Desires to have still more portion in him,
If [human] tongue as well as [bird] wing⁷ bestirs to his glory.

3. Herr, deine Güte reicht, so weit der Himmel ist,
Und deine Wahrheit langt, so weit die Wolken gehen.

3. Lord, your goodness reaches as far as the sky is,
And your truth extends as far as the clouds go.⁸

¹Some Luther Bibles of Bach's day here read "da" ("there"), not "das" ("this"); later and earlier Bibles also read "da." See also fn. 11, below.

²Psalm 50:23.

³The meaning of the received Hebrew text that underlies what the Luther Bibles have rendered "und da/das ist der Weg" is now uncertain. Most non-Lutheran renderings make it clear that the "I" in "I show him," just like the "me" of the opening phrase, refers to "God." The different form and content of these other renderings (e.g., "and to him who orders his conduct aright I will show the salvation of God"; or, "and to him who improves his way I will show the salvation of God") readily allows for the "I/me" to be "God" throughout the verse. But Luther would have rejected such translations on theological grounds, as he believed that humans could do nothing to merit being shown God's salvation. In the Lutheran interpretation of Bach's day, the voice of the psalmist here is the literal voice of (the pre-existent) Christ himself, such that (the incarnated) Christ, Jesus, is then the one who shows/enacts the salvation of God.

⁴This line's phrase "in Schnuren geht" corresponds to the modern colloquialism "Es geht wie am Schnürchen" (literally, "it goes as [if] by the little [line of] string"). The expression can, among other things, refer to the controlling of puppets with strings. In Bach's cantata, then, "air, water, firmament, and earth" are like puppets: though speechless, they become expressive by dint of the way their controller moves them.

⁵The metaphor of the "Schoss" here is presumably not the "lap" but the archaic, biblical sense of "bosom," i.e., the enclosed space formed by one's chest and arms. The language of lines 5–6, and the sense that this refers to nature's "bosom," may be partly indebted to Proverbs 21:14, "Eine heimliche Gabe stillt den Zorn, und ein Geschenk im Schoss den heftigen Grimm" ("A secret gift stills anger, and a present in the bosom vehement wrath").

⁶"Hegen" is apparently being used here metaphorically in its archaic sense of "behagen" ("to enjoy"). The poet used the expression "was Odem hegt" ("that enjoys breath") in place of the standard biblical expression "was Odem hat" ("that has breath") to accommodate the poem's rhyme scheme.

⁷Apparently the idea is not only that people and birds "desire" to glorify God, but also that any glorifying of God will then be carried and repeated by others, by analogy to the way that rumors are carried and repeated by metaphorical "birds." The cryptic language of this line appears to be derived from Ecclesiastes 10:20, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "die Vögel des Himmels führen die Stimme, und die Fittiche haben, sagens nach" ("the birds of the sky may carry [what] your voice [has expressed], and what has wings may repeat it").

⁸Lines 1–2 are a nearly verbatim quotation of Psalm 36:6 in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, employed to go with the nature imagery of the previous movement.

Wüsst ich gleich sonst nicht, wie herrlich gross du bist,
So könnt ich es gar leicht aus deinen Werken sehen.
Wie sollt man dich mit Dank davor nicht stetig preisen?
Da du uns willst den Weg des Heils hingegen weisen.

Zweiter Teil

4. Einer aber unter ihnen, da er sahe, dass er gesund worden war, kehrte um und preisete Gott mit lauter Stimme und fiel auf sein Angesicht zu seinen Füßen und dankte ihm, und das war ein Samariter.¹²

5. Welch Übermass der Güte Schenkst du mir!
Doch was gibt mein Gemüte Dir dafür?
Herr, ich weiss sonst nichts zu bringen,
Als dir Dank und Lob zu singen.

6. Sieh meinen Willen an, ich kenne, was ich bin:
Leib, Leben und Verstand, Gesundheit, Kraft und Sinn,
Der¹⁴ du mich lässt mit frohem Mund geniessen,

If I did not yet know otherwise how gloriously great you are,
I could so easily see it from your works [of Creation].⁹
How shall one not, in return,¹⁰ constantly praise you with thanks?
There [in your works], on the other hand [alongside your Word], you desire to show us the way of salvation.¹¹

Part 2

4. But one among them [the lepers Jesus healed], when he saw that he had become well, turned back [toward Jesus] and praised God with a loud voice and fell upon his face at his [Jesus's] feet and thanked him—and this was a Samaritan.¹³

5. What overmeasure of goodness You bestow on me!
But what does my spirit Give you in return?
Lord, I know nothing else to bring
But to sing you thanks and praise.

6. Look upon my will; I know what I am:
Body, life, and understanding;¹⁶ health, strength, and mind;¹⁷
[All] of which you let me savor with enraptured mouth,
Are streams of your grace that you let flow upon me.
Love, peace, righteousness, and joy in your [Holy] Spirit¹⁸

⁹Seeing God's "works" and thus knowing God here refers not to his deeds in general but to nature—what God has made, the works of his Creation (as is expressed in Romans 1:20).

¹⁰"Davor" in older German, depending on context, can be simply an alternate spelling of "dafür" ("for this / in return"). "Dafür" is used in line 4 of movement 5.

¹¹Here the meaning of the word "da" can be equivocal in the absence of taking into account that this line is a paraphrase of Psalm 50:23, the passage that appears verbatim at the opening of the cantata. That verbatim text gives the contemporary biblical reading "*das ist der Weg*" ("*this is the way*"), but this paraphrase draws upon the alternative contemporary biblical wording "*da ist der Weg*" ("*there is the way*"); see also fn. 1, above.

¹²Luke 17:15-16.

¹³In the Lutheran view, it was especially remarkable, and laudable, that the only leper who thanked Jesus and praised God was a Samaritan, an inhabitant of the district of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Lutheranism of Bach's day reckoned the Samaritans to be gentiles ("Heiden") who worshipped pagan idols alongside the God of Israel; apparently all the other lepers in the Luke 17 story were Jews.

¹⁴Some modern editions silently change this "der" ("of which") to read "die" ("which").

¹⁶The life of the follower of Jesus is "the life of God," which according to Ephesians 4:18 is linked with proper "understanding" (in Luther Bibles, "Verstand").

¹⁷The mind of the follower of Jesus is "the mind of Christ," according to 1 Corinthians 2:16, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Denn wer hat des HERRN Sinn erkannt? Oder wer will ihn unterweisen? Wir aber haben Christi Sinn" ("For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who will instruct him? We [followers of Jesus], however, have the mind of Christ").

¹⁸The language of this line is derived from Romans 14:17, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "das Reich Gottes ist ... Gerechtigkeit und Friede, und Freude in dem Heiligen Geiste" ("the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit"). The Calov study Bible in Bach's personal library comments at this verse that the three best treasures of the kingdom of God are the righteousness of Christ, the peace with God the father, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Sind Ströme deiner Gnad, die du auf mich lässt
fließen.
Lieb, Fried, Gerechtigkeit und Freud in deinem Geist
Sind Schätz, dadurch du mir schon hier ein Vorbild
weist,
Was Gutes du gedenkst mir dorten zuzuteilen,
Um¹⁵ mich an Leib und Seel vollkommentlich zu
heilen.

**7. Wie sich ein Vatr erbarmet
Übr seine junge Kindlein klein:
So tut der Herr uns Armen,
So wir ihn kindlich fürchten rein.
Er kennt das arme Gemächte,
Gott weiss, wir sind nur Staub.
Gleichwie das Gras vom Rechen,
Ein Blum und fallendes Laub,
Der Wind nur drüber wehet,
So ist es nimmer da:
Also der Mensch vergehet,
Sein End, das ist ihm nah.²¹**

Are treasures through which you show me now here [on earth]
as a prefiguration
Of good things you have in mind to apportion me there [in
heaven],
So as to heal/save¹⁹ me perfectly²⁰ in body and soul.

**7. Like a father has mercy
On his little young children:
The Lord acts in the same way toward us wretched ones
If we fear him innocently, childlike.
He knows the wretched creature;
We are, Lord knows,²² but dust.
Just like grass to the rake,
Like a flower and falling foliage,
The wind merely wafts over it,
And it is there no more:²³
In the same way, the human being passes;
His end, it is near.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV17 for an annotated translation

¹⁵Modern editions here read “Und” (“And”). In Bach’s own materials and in the libretto of this cantata reprinted in 1728, the line reads not “Und ... zu heilen” (“And to heal/save”) but “Um ... zu heilen” (“So as to heal/save”).

¹⁹This is the language of biblical typology. In this case, the good things of God in one’s life on earth are “types” (i.e., prefigurations; biblical German, “Vorbilder”) that foreshadow the good things of God in one’s afterlife in heaven. The poet expertly equivocates in his use of the word “heilen” (“to heal” and/or “to save”), such that God’s present good things on earth heal and save the believer, and then God’s future good things, the “antitypes,” effect and reflect the perfection of salvation experienced in heaven (see also fn. 20, below).

²⁰This line draws upon 1 Corinthians 13:10, “Wenn aber kommen wird das Vollkommene, so wird das Stückwerk aufhören” (“But when what is perfect [the heavenly] will come, then what is piecemeal [the earthly] will leave off”).

²¹A stanza of “Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren.”

²²The expression “Gott weiss” (literally, “God knows”) is used here not as an affirmation of the omniscience of God. It simply emphasizes the truth and obviousness of what is being said; just as, e.g., in English, one might say “Lord/Goodness/God knows I need a haircut.”

²³This line’s “ist es nimmer da” does not mean “it is never there.” Here “nimmer” is an older German form of “nicht mehr”; later German might use “nimmermehr.”