

"Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis in meinem Herzen" BWV 21

1. Teil¹

1. Sinfonia

2. *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis in meinem Herzen; aber deine Tröstungen erquicken² meine Seele.³*

3. Seufzer, Tränen, Kummer, Not,
Ängstlichs Sehnen, Furcht und Tod
Nagen mein beklemmtes Herz,
Ich empfinde Jammer, Schmerz.

4. Wie hast du dich, mein Gott,
In meiner Not,
In meiner Furcht und Zagen
Denn ganz von mir gewandt?
Ach! kennst du nicht dein Kind?
Ach! hörst du nicht das Klagen
Von denen, die dir sind
Mit Bund und Treu verwandt?
Da warest meine Lust
Und bist mir grausam worden;
Ich suche dich an allen Orten,
Ich ruf und schrei dir nach,
Allein mein Weh und Ach!
Scheint itzt, als sei es dir ganz unbewusst.

5. Bäche von gesalzenen Zähren,
Fluten rauschen stets einher.
Sturm und Wellen mich versehren,
Und dies trübsalsvolle Meer
Will mir Geist und Leben schwächen,
Mast und Anker wollen brechen,
Hier versink ich in den Grund,
Dort seh in der Höllen Schlund,⁴
Bäche von gesalzenen Zähren.

Part 1

1. Sinfonia

2. *I had much grieving in my heart; but your [my God's] consolations restore my soul.*

3. Sighs, tears, grief, distress,
Anxious yearning, fear and death
Gnaw at my constricted heart;
I feel misery, pain.

4. How is it that you, my God,
In my distress,
In my fear and dismay,
Have turned yourself from me entirely?
Ah, do you not know your child?
Ah, do you not hear the lamenting
Of those who are
Linked to you by covenant and faithfulness?
You were my delight
And have become cruel to me;
I seek you in all places;
I call and cry for you;
Yet my "woe and ah"
Now looks as though it were entirely unknown to you.

5. Streams of salted tears,
Floods, rush forth constantly.
Storm and waves harm me,
And this tribulation-filled sea
Will weaken me of spirit and life;
Mast and anchor will break;
Here I sink to the seabed;
There [I] peer into the jaws of hell [and see]:⁵

¹Not all of Bach's performances of Cantata 21 were divided into two parts.

²In the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, the word here is not "erquicken" but the (past-tense) "ergetzten." In older German, "ergetzen/ergötzen" meant "to bring enjoyment"; in modern German, however, "ergötzen" means "to amuse." In the context of this cantata libretto, "erquicken" makes more sense than "ergetzten" (or "erquickten").

³Psalm 94:19.

⁴This line is often given in modern editions as "Dort seh *ich* der Hölle Schlund" ("There *I* see the maw/chasm of hell"); and these words are presented as if they were the final line poem's second section. Other times this line is edited (and likewise presented as if it were the final line) as "Dort seh *ins* der Hölle Schlund" ("There [I] see/look *into* the maw/abyss of hell"); but the contraction "ins" (for "in das") does not make sense here, as "Schlund" is masculine and would require "in *den*," not "ins." In the original Bach materials, the end of this section in fact features *two* lines: "Dort seh *in* der Hölle Schlund [i.e., 'in dem Schlund der Hölle'], / Bäche von gesalzenen Zähren" ("There [I] peer into the jaws of hell [and see]: / Streams of salted tears"). As in many aria texts from these years, then, the last line of the poem repeats the first.

⁵The "Höllen Schlund"—in English usually called "Hellmouth," or "the Jaws of Hell"—is the entrance to hell, pictured as the yawning mouth of a whale or a huge monster.

Streams of salted tears.⁶

6. *Was betrübst du dich, meine Seele, und bist so unruhig in mir? Harre auf Gott; denn ich werde ihm noch danken, dass er meines Angesichtes Hilfe und mein Gott ist.*⁷

2. Teil

7. Seele: Ach Jesu, meine Ruh,
Mein Licht, wo bleibest du?
Jesus: O Seele sieh! Ich bin bei dir.
Seele: Bei mir?
Hier ist ja lauter Nacht.
Jesus: Ich bin dein treuer Freund,
Der auch im Dunkeln wacht,
Wo lauter Schalken seind.
Seele: Brich doch mit deinem Glanz
Und Licht des Trostes ein!
Jesus: Die Stunde kömmet schon,
Da deines Kampfes Kron
Dir wird ein süßes Labsal sein.

8. Seele: Komm, mein Jesu, und erquickte,
Und erfreu mit deinem Blicke!
Diese Seele, die soll sterben,
Und nicht leben
Und in ihrer Unglückshöhle
Ganz verderben.
Ich muss stets in Kummer schweben,
Ja, ach ja, ich bin verloren.
Nein, ach nein, du hassest mich.
Ach, Jesu, durchsüsse mir Seele und Herze.
Komm, mein Jesu, und erquickte
Mich mit deinem Gnadenblicke!

6. *Why do you sadden yourself, my soul, and why are you so restless within me? Wait for God; for I will yet thank him, because he is the help/salvation⁸ of my countenance, and my God.*

Part 2

7. Soul: Ah, Jesus, my rest,
My light, where are you tarrying?
Jesus: O soul, see, I am with you.
Soul: With me?
Here [it] is indeed pure night.
Jesus: I am your faithful friend,
Who also keeps watch in the darkness,
Where there are pure rogues.
Soul: Break in, then, with your luster
And light of consolation.
Jesus: The hour is already coming,
When your contest's victory wreath⁹
Will be a sweet restorative to you.

8. Soul: Come, my Jesus, and restore,
And gladden with your gaze,
This soul that shall die
And not live,
And in its misfortune-cavern¹⁰
Entirely decay.
I must constantly hover in grief;
Yes, ah yes, I am lost [from salvation].
No, ah no, you hate me.
Ah, Jesus, fill me with sweetness of soul and heart.
Come, my Jesus, and restore
Me with your gaze of grace.

⁶See fn. 4, above.

⁷Psalm 42:12 and 43:5.

⁸“Helfen” (“to help/assist”) was one of Luther’s many metaphors for “to save” (that is, from a hellish life on earth, and from an afterlife in hell).

⁹The “crown” (“Kron”) is the victory wreath placed on one’s head after a sports contest (“Kampf”). The soul’s earthly sojourn is understood as a metaphorical athletic race; at the end, the Christian believer receives the imperishable prize of a resurrected body. The crown, the athletic contest, and their related metaphors are laid out in 1 Corinthians 9:24-25, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Wisset ihr nicht, dass die, so in den Schranken laufen, die laufen alle, aber Einer erlanget das Kleinod? Laufet nun also, dass ihr es ergreifet. Ein jeglicher aber, der da kämpfet, enthält sich alles Dinges: jene also, dass sie eine vergängliche Krone empfangen; wir aber eine unvergängliche.” (“Do you not know that they who run in the race-course, run all; but [only] one gets the [prize-]medal? Now then, run, that you may obtain it [i.e., the prize medal]. But each man who competes, abstains from all things: those men [will exercise this self-control], then, that they may receive a perishable crown [i.e., a victory wreath, whose leaves decay eventually]; but we [abstain so that we may receive] an imperishable one.”) See also 2 Timothy 2:5 and 4:7-8.

¹⁰In this movement, the unwholesome “Unglückshöhle” (“misfortune-cavern”) of the soul is contrasted with the wholesome “Wundenhöhle” (“wound-cavity”) in the rib of the crucified Jesus; see also fn. 11, below.

Jesus: Ja, ich komme und erquickte
Dich mit meinem Gnadenblicke,
Deine Seele, die soll leben,
Und nicht sterben,
Hier aus dieser Wundenhöhle
Sollst du erben
Heil durch diesen Saft der Reben,
Nein, ach nein, du bist erkoren.
Ja, ach ja, ich liebe dich.
Entweichet, ihr Sorgen, verschwinde, du
Schmerze!
Ja, ich komme und erquickte
Dich mit meinem Gnadenblicke.

Jesus: Yes, I come and restore
You with my gaze of grace;
Your soul, it shall live
And not die;
Here, out of this wound-cavity [in my rib],¹¹
You shall inherit
Healing/salvation¹² through [my blood,] this juice of the
grape;¹³
No, ah no, you are chosen [for salvation].
Yes, ah yes, I love you.
Escape, you worries; disappear, you pain.
Yes, I come and restore
You with my gaze of grace.

9. *Sei nun wieder zufrieden, meine Seele, denn der Herr tut dir Guts.*¹⁴

Be now again at peace,¹⁶ my soul, for the Lord does good unto you.

**Was helfen uns die schweren Sorgen,
Was hilft uns unser Weh und Ach?
Was hilft es, dass wir alle Morgen
Beseufzen unser Ungemach?
Wir machen unser Kreuz und Leid
Nur grösser durch die Traurigkeit.**

**How do heavy worries help us,
How does our “woe and ah” help us?
How does it help, that every morning
We bemoan our affliction?
We make our cross-bearing¹⁷ and suffering
Only greater by the sorrow.**

**Denk nicht in deiner Drangsalhitze,
Dass du von Gott verlassen seist,
Und dass Gott der im Schosse sitze,
Der sich mit stetem Glücke speist.**

**Do not think in the heat of your oppression
That you are forsaken by God,
And that God may seat in the bosom [of Abraham—
heaven]¹⁸**

¹¹The “wound-cavity” is a reference to John 19:34, “Der Kriegsknechte einer eröffnete seine Seite mit einem Speer, und alsobald ging Blut und Wasser heraus” (“[Upon seeing that Jesus was dead on the cross,] one of the Roman soldiers opened his [Jesus’s] side with a spear, and immediately blood and water went out”). This miraculous blood-and-water have traditionally been interpreted as the blood/wine of the Sacrament of Communion and the water of the Sacrament of Baptism. The wound-cavity in Jesus’s rib was embraced as a metaphorical place of refuge for the Christian believer. For example, a chorale stanza in the Wagner Hymnal, owned by Bach, reads: “Jesu, ... / Deiner Wunden Höhle / Ist mein Aufenthalt / ... [Ich] finde Ruh / In der offenen Seiten Ritze / Da ich sicher sitze” (“Jesus, ... your wound-cavity is my abode ... I find rest/peace in the opened side’s cleft, where I sit securely”).

¹²“Heilen” (“to heal”) was another of Luther’s many metaphors for “to save”; see n. 8 above.

¹³The “juice of the grape” is the wine of the Sacrament of Communion. The phrase “Saft der Reben” was famously employed in the Lutheran chorale “Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele,” one of whose stanzas reads “Vernunft ... muss hier weichen, / Kann dies Wunder nicht erreichen, / ... dass mit dem Saft der Reben, / uns wird Christi Blut gegeben” (“Reason must give way here; [it] cannot comprehend this miracle, that with the juice of the grape [the consecrated wine of Communion] the [real, physical] blood of Christ is given to us”).

¹⁴Psalm 116:7.

¹⁶The word “zufrieden” was apparently understood here in its older, general sense of being “at peace/rest” (“zu Frieden”), not in its more specific sense of being “satisfied/content.” The Calov Bible, listed in Bach’s library, explains that the Psalm’s “Sei nun wieder zufrieden” means “Kehre dich wieder zu deiner Ruhe” (“return to your rest/peace”).

¹⁷“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”).

¹⁸“Im Schosse” here does not refer to God’s lap. The turn of phrase is derived from “Abraham’s bosom,” an expression in Luke 16:19-31, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Being “in someone’s bosom” referred to reclining at the right of the host (i.e., the place of honor) at a meal (e.g., John 13:23). In Luke 16:22-23, Lazarus is depicted as being, after his death, “in seinem Schosse” (“in his [Abraham’s] bosom”). Western Christianity came to use “Abraham’s bosom” as a designation for heaven.

**Die folgend Zeit verändert viel
Und setzet jeglichem sein Ziel.¹⁵**

**Him who [on earth] dines in constant good fortune.
The ensuing time changes many things
And sets to each his limit/lifespan.¹⁹**

10. Erfreue dich, Seele, erfreue dich, Herze,
Entweiche nun, Kummer, verschwinde, du
Schmerze!
Verwandle dich, Weinen, in lauterem Wein,
Es wird nun mein Ächzen ein Jauchzen mir²⁰ sein!
Es brennet und flammet die reineste Kerze
Der Liebe, des Trostes in Seele und Brust,
Weil Jesus mich tröstet mit himmlischer Lust.

Gladden yourself, soul; gladden yourself, heart;
Escape now, grief; disappear, you pain.
Transform yourself, weeping, into pure wine;
My groaning will now be, to me, a shouting [for joy].
The purest candle[light] of love, of consolation,
Burns and flames in [my] soul and breast,
So long as²¹ Jesus consoles me with heavenly delight.

11. *Das Lamm, das erwürget ist, ist würdig zu
nehmen Kraft und Reichtum und Weisheit und
Stärke und Ehre und Preis und Lob. Lob und Ehre
und Preis und Gewalt sei unserm Gott von Ewigkeit
zu Ewigkeit. Amen, Alleluja!*²²

*The lamb that is slain is worthy to take might and riches and
wisdom and strength and honor and praise and adulation.
Adulation and honor and praise and power be to our God
from eternity to eternity. Amen, hallelujah!*

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV21> for an annotated translation

¹⁵Two stanzas of the chorale “Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten.”

¹⁹The “Ziel” here evidently refers to the time limit set on a person’s life. Job 14:5, in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, reads “Er hat seine bestimmte Zeit, die Zahl seiner Monden steht bei dir; du hast ein Ziel gesetzt, das wird er nicht übergehen” (“[A man] has his specified time, the number of his months is with you [God]; you have set a [time] limit that he will not go over”).

²⁰Some editions mistakenly read not “mir” (“to me”) but “nur” (“only”).

²¹In this context, “weil” is apparently meant to be understood in the older German sense of “so long as.”

²²Revelation 5:12b, 5:13c, 7:12b, 19:4b. (See also 1 Peter 5:11.)