

“Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn” BWV 23

1. Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn,
Der du von Ewigkeit in der Entfernung schon
Mein Herzeleid und meine Leibespein
Umständlich angesehen, erbarm dich mein!
Und lass durch deine Wunderhand,
Die so viel Böses abgewandt,
Mir gleichfalls Hilf und Trost geschehen!

2. Ach! gehe nicht vorüber;
Du, aller Menschen Heil,
Bist ja erschienen,
Die Kranken und nicht die Gesunden zu bedienen.
Drum nehm ich ebenfalls an deiner Allmacht teil;
Ich sehe dich auf diesen Wegen,
Worauf man
Mich hat wollen legen,
Auch in der Blindheit an.
Ich fasse mich
Und lasse dich
Nicht ohne deinen Segen.

3. Aller Augen warten, Herr,
Du allmächtger Gott, auf dich,

1. [Jesus,] you true God and son of David,¹
You who in the distance,² from eternity,
Already closely looked upon my heartache
And my bodily pain, have mercy on me.
And through your miracle-working hand,
Which has averted so much evil,
Let help/salvation and consolation befall me likewise.

2. Ah, do not pass by;³
You, the salvation of all humankind,
Have appeared, yes,
To minister to the sick and not the healthy.
Thus I, likewise, partake of your omnipotence;
I look upon you in these paths
Where people⁴
Wished to let me lie,
Also in blindness.⁵
I compose myself
And will not let you go
Without [receiving] your blessing.⁶

3. The eyes of all wait, Lord,
You omnipotent God, for you,⁷

¹Lines 1 and 4 are derived from the story of healing a blind beggar in Luke 18:35-43 (also, with many varying details, in Mark 10:46-52, Matthew 20:29-34, and Matthew 9:27-31). The blind man says, in Luke 18:38, “Jesu, du Sohn Davids, erbarme dich mein!” (“Jesus, you son of [King] David [of Israel], have mercy on me”); line 1 of the cantata movement adds to this messianic acknowledgment by hailing Jesus as “true God.”

²The “distance” is of both space and time. In classical Christian belief, derived from the Gospel of John, Jesus is the “logos/word become flesh.” The logos of God exists from eternity (outside of time) and is all-knowing, and thus can look closely upon individual humans of all times already before they are born.

³That is, “do not pass by [without helping/saving me].” The formulation is from Luke 18:37-38 (and Matthew 20:30).

⁴This potentially confusing sentence in lines 6–9 is derived from Luke 18:36-39 (and Mark 10:46-48), where many among “the crowd”—rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day as “das Volk” (“the people”)—sternly commanded the blind beggar (see fn. 1, above) to be silent.

⁵The blind beggar (see fn. 1, above) is unnamed in Luke 18, but in Mark 10 he is identified as “Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus.” Both gospels describe this man as being “am Wege” (“by [the side of] the path”). The puzzling phrase “Sehen ... Auch in der Blindheit an” is often translated as “Look upon ... Even in [my] blindness,” but this does not properly reflect what the story of Bartimaeus entails: it is not that “I” am able to see Jesus “even in blindness,” but “also [i.e., like Bartimaeus] in blindness.”

⁶These lines are derived from Genesis 32:26, the story of Jacob, the father of the tribes of Israel, wrestling with God at Peniel. God says to Jacob, “Lass mich gehen” (“Let me go”), and Jacob answers, “Ich lasse dich nicht [gehen], du segnest mich denn” (“I will not let you [go], unless you bless me”). According to Luther’s radically christocentric reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, it was Christ himself with whom Jacob wrestled at Peniel. In the cantata libretto the notion seems to be that the speaker is blind/faithless, and will not let go of Jesus until he bestows, with his miracle-working hand, the blessing of sight/faith. Upon miraculously granting him sight, Jesus says to the blind beggar in Mark 10:52 and Luke 18:42, “dein Glaube hat dir geholfen” (“your faith/belief has helped/saved you”); see also “Hilf” as “help/salvation” in line 7 of movement 1, above.

⁷What “the eyes of all [the faithful] wait for,” according to Lutheran interpretation of Psalm 145 (whose language this text draws on) and John 6, is God’s feeding believers with the bread and wine of the Christian sacrament of communion. Psalm 145:15, in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, reads “Aller Augen warten auf dich, und du gibst ihnen ihre Speise”

Und die meinen sonderlich.
Gib denselben Kraft und Licht,
Lass sie nicht
Immerdar in Finsternissen!
Künftig soll dein Wink allein
Der geliebte Mittelpunkt
Aller ihrer Werke sein,
Bis du sie einst durch den Tod
Wiederum gedenkst zu schliessen.

**4. Christe, du Lamm Gottes,
Der du trägst die Sünd¹⁰ der Welt,
Erbarm dich unser!
Christe, du Lamm Gottes,
Der du trägst die Sünd der Welt,
Erbarm dich unser!
Christe, du Lamm Gottes,
Der du trägst die Sünd der Welt,
Gib uns dein Frieden! Amen.¹¹**

And mine especially.
Give them strength and light;
Do not leave them
Forever in darknesses.⁸
Your signal alone
Shall come to be the beloved center
Of all their works,⁹
Until you some day, through death,
Have a mind to close them again.

**4. Christ, you lamb of God,
You who bear the sin of the world,
Have mercy on us.
Christ, you lamb of God,
You who bear the sin of the world,
Have mercy on us.
Christ, you lamb of God,
You who bear the sin of the world,
Give us your peace. Amen.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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(“The eyes of all wait for you, and you give them their food/communion”); the “Speise” in the second half of this verse was taken to be a foreshadowing of communion, by dint of being linked with Luther’s use of the word “Speise” in John 6:55, where Jesus says “denn mein Fleisch ist die rechte Speise, und mein Blut ist der rechte Trank” (“for my flesh [the bread of communion] is the proper food, and my blood [the wine of communion] is the proper drink”).

⁸The plural, “Finsternissen,” is presumably meant to refer to the two darknesses cited in Isaiah 29:32, “die Augen der Blinden werden aus dem Dunkel und Finsternis sehen” (“the eyes of the blind [i.e., a metaphor for the helpless] shall see out of the obscurity [i.e., spiritual murkiness] and darkness [i.e., blindness]”). Lutheran interpretation attached great importance to this passage as a prediction of God’s opening the eyes of the gentiles to belief in God and his messiah and divine son, Jesus.

⁹This formulation suggests that one’s “eyes” can do “[good] works” if they focus on God’s signals toward goodness. The sentiment is presumably adapted from Proverbs 16:30, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Wer mit den Augen winkt, denkt nichts gutes; und wer mit den Lippen deutet, vollbringt böses” (“Whoever signals with the eyes, thinks nothing good; and whoever indicates with the lips, accomplishes evil”).

¹⁰The phrase “die Sünd” here is singular, not plural: “die Sünd[e],” not “die Sünd[en].” It is derived from John 1:29, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Siehe, das ist Gottes Lamm, welches der Welt Sünde traget” (“Look, that is God’s lamb, which bears the sin of the world”).

¹¹German hymnic version of the “Agnus Dei” from the Ordinary of the Latin Mass, whose melody also appears instrumentally in the second movement of this cantata. Bach evidently conceived BWV 23 as a three-movement work, to whose performing materials he soon afterward added this setting.