

"Es ist nichts Gesundes an meinem Leibe" BWV 25

1. *Es ist nichts Gesundes an meinem Leibe vor
deinem Dräuen¹ und ist kein Friede in meinen
Gebeinen vor meiner Sünde.²*

2. Die ganze Welt ist nur ein Hospital,
Wo Menschen von unzählbar grosser Zahl
Und auch die Kinder in der Wiegen
An Krankheit hart darniederliegen.
Den einen quälet in der Brust
Ein hitzges Fieber böser Lust;
Der andre lieget krank
An eigner Ehre hässlichem Gestank;⁴
Den dritten zehrt die Geldsucht⁵ ab

1. *There is nothing healthy in my body in the face of³
[God's] threatening, and no peace in my bones in the
face of my sin.*

2. The whole world is just a hospice,⁶
Where humans in uncountably large number,
And even children in the cradle,
Grimly lie low from [sin's] sickness.⁷
The one is tortured in his breast
By a hot fever of evil [carnal] desire;⁸
The other lies sick
From the repugnant stench of self-honor;
Avarice consumes the third

¹“Dräuen” is an older spelling of “Drohen” (“threatening”). The noun employed in the original Hebrew text means God’s “rage” or “indignation,” but Luther translated it as God’s “threatening.”

²Psalm 38:3.

³The preposition employed in the original Hebrew text can mean “because of” or “in the face of.” Most interpreters of Psalm 38’s usage go with the former, but Luther opted for the latter.

⁴ These lines continue the intensely medical bent of the text. “Gestank” is not just a foul smell; it was the word for the “miasma” or “bad air” thought to be the agent of disease.

⁵ Many kinds of ailments had names ending in “-sucht,” like “Wassersucht” (dropsy). “Geldsucht” is a play on “Gelbsucht”—jaundice.

⁶In Bach’s day the German word “Hospital” (like its English cognate) carried a variety of meanings, including its current sense. But the word was also employed to refer to institutions for the housing and maintenance of the needy, or to asylums for the destitute, infirm, or aged — or what in later English would be called a “hospice” (and in later German a “Hospiz”), a place for the care of the dying or the incurably ill. According to the Lutheranism of Bach’s cantatas, believers can receive in the present life a proleptic cure for their fundamental “sickness” (i.e., sin), but the full realization of one’s healing comes not in this world but the next.

⁷This is a subtle but significant allusion to Luther’s rendering of the famous Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 53:4. Its original Hebrew text reads “he has borne our sicknesses.” Christianity traditionally understood Isaiah’s Suffering Servant passages to be predictions about Jesus, but Luther also more specifically understood the crucified Jesus to have borne what Luther deemed “our sickness” per se, namely the primal, singular sin of Adam that brought about the primal sickness that is human sin. For this reason Luther changed “our sicknesses” in Isaiah 53:4 to the singular: “er trug unsere Krankheit” (“he [Jesus] bore [the burden of] our sickness [Original Sin]”). The doctrine of Original Sin teaches that through Adam’s Fall human nature is in its essence wholly corrupted. Children in the cradle, to be sure, can easily become physically ill, but the more significant point in the cantata is that even babies are sinners, tainted by Original Sin.

⁸“Böse” could mean either “angry” or “evil,” but in this line it is the latter. The formulation “böse Lust” is derived from Colossians 3:5, which speaks of an (evil) carnal desire for the things of this world: “So tötet nun eure Glieder, die auf Erden sind: Hurerei, Unreinigkeit, ... böse Lust” (“Mortify, therefore, now your [bodily] members that are on earth: whoredom, impurity, ... evil desire”).

Und stürzt ihn vor der Zeit ins Grab.
Der erste Fall hat jedermann beflecket
Und mit dem Sündenaussatz angestecket.
Ach! dieses Gift durchwühlt auch meine Glieder.
Wo find ich Armer Arznei?
Wer stehet mir in meinem Elend bei?
Wer ist mein Arzt, wer hilft mir wieder?

3. Ach, wo hol ich Armer Rat?
Meinen Aussatz, meine Beulen
Kann kein Kraut noch Pflaster heilen
Als die Salb aus Gilead.
Du, mein Arzt, Herr Jesu, nur
Weisst die beste Seelenkur.

4. O Jesu, lieber Meister,
Zu dir flieh ich;
Ach, stärke die geschwächten Lebensgeister!¹³
Erbarme dich,
Du Arzt und Helfer aller Kranken,
Verstoss mich nicht
Von deinem Angesicht!
Mein Heiland, mache mich von Sündenaussatz rein,
So will ich dir
Mein ganzes Herz dafür
Zum steten Opfer weihn
Und lebenslang vor deine Hülfe danken.

And plunges him before his time into the grave.
The primal fall [of Adam]⁹ has tainted
And infected everyone with the leprosy of sin.
Ah, this poison also rakes through my members.
Where do I, wretch, find medicine?
Who stands by me in my misery?
Who is my physician; who restores me to health?¹⁰

3. Ah, where may I, wretch, get counsel?
My leprosy, my boils—
No herb or poultice¹¹ can heal them
Other than the balm of Gilead.¹²
Only you, my physician, Lord Jesus,
Know the best cure for the soul.

4. O Jesus, dear master,
To you I flee;
Ah, strengthen my weakened vital spirits.
Have mercy,
You physician and helper of all the sick;
Do not banish me
From your countenance.
My savior, cleanse me of the leprosy of sin
And I will consecrate
My whole heart in return
As constant offering
And give thanks, life-long, for your help.

⁹Adam's "primal fall" is the source of Original Sin.

¹⁰In Bach's day, the verb "wiederhelfen" carried several meanings, including "to restore to health."

¹¹Christian interpretation of Wisdom 16:22, the passage drawn upon here, suggests that only Jesus ("the word of the Lord") can truly heal. In the Calov Bible commentary (a book owned by Bach), Luther's translation of the passage reads "Es heilet sie weder Kraut noch Pflaster, sondern dein Wort, HERR (dein selbständiges Wort, Joh[annes] 1:1), welches alles heilet." — "It was neither herb nor poultice that healed, rather your word, Lord (your 'self-subsisting Word,' John 1:1), which heals everything." In this very Luthlean reading, the ancient Israelites, bitten by 'fiery/poisonous serpents' (Numbers 21:6-9), during the exodus from slavery in Egypt, are said to have been healed by Jesus, "the Word of God."

¹²In Jeremiah 8:22, the Luther Bible speaks of a "Salbe in Gilead" ("ointment/balm in Gilead"), which was a resin from balsam trees in the portion of the land Gilead that was assigned to the Israelite tribe of Manasseh. This resin was held to be, among other things, an antidote to poison. In traditional Christian interpretation, the "balm in Gilead" was sometimes understood to prefigure the healing/saving blood of Jesus.

¹³Before the electrical nature of nerves was understood, "Lebensgeister" were the fluids believed to course through them.

5. Öffne meinen schlechten Liedern,
Jesu, dein Genadenohr!
Wenn ich dort im höhern Chor
Werde mit den Engeln singen,
Soll mein Danklied besser klingen.

**6. Ich will alle meine Tage
Rühmen deine starke Hand,
Dass du meine Plag und Klage
Hast so herzlich abgewandt.
Nicht nur in der Sterblichkeit
Soll dein Ruhm sein ausgebreit':
Ich wills auch hernach erweisen
Und dort ewiglich dich preisen.¹⁶**

5. To my simple¹⁴ songs,
Jesus, open your ear of grace.
When I am singing there [in heaven]
With the angels in the superior choir,¹⁵
My song of thanks shall sound better.

**6. All my days I will
Glorify your mighty hand,
Because you have so heartily averted
My torment and lament.
Not only during my mortal state
Shall your glory be spread;
I want to demonstrate it¹⁷ also hereafter
And praise you there [in heaven] eternally.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV25 for an annotated translation

¹⁴“Schlecht” is apparently used here in the older German sense of “schlicht” (“plain and simple,” “artless”).

¹⁵The particular sense of the phrase “im höheren Chor” is elusive. The Luther Bibles of Bach’s day labeled each of the Psalms 120–134 “Ein Lied *im höhern Chor*” (“A song in the superior choir”). In the original Hebrew, the superscription is, literally, “A song of ascents.” Bach’s Calov Bible offers an explanation for Luther’s rendering of the Hebrew label: “[Das Lied] wird vom Aufsteigen also genennet, entweder wegen Aufsteigung und Erhebung der Herzen, in diesen XV. Liedern, ... oder wegen der Höhe und Fürtrefflichkeit desselbigen” (“[The song] is so named from the ascent, either on account of the ascending and lifting up of the hearts in these fifteen songs, ... or on account of the height and excellence of these songs”).

¹⁶A stanza of “Treuer Gott, ich muss dir klagen.”

¹⁷The “es” (“it”) in the contraction “wills” (“will es”) refers either to “das Ausbreiten” (“the spreading”) or “das Rühmen” (“the glorifying”).