

“Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir” BWV 38

1. Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir,
Herr Gott, erhöhr mein Rufen;
Dein gnädig Ohr neig her zu mir
Und meiner Bitt sie öffne!
Denn so du willst das sehen an,
Was Sünd und Unrecht ist getan,
Wer kann, Herr, vor dir bleiben?

1. From deep distress I cry to you,
Lord God; give heed to¹ my clamoring.
Incline here² to me your merciful ears³
And open them to my plea.
For if you will look upon
What sin and lawlessness⁴ is committed,
Who can, Lord, abide before you?

2. In Jesu Gnade wird allein
Der Trost vor uns und die Vergebung sein,
Weil durch des Satans Trug und List
Der Menschen ganzes Leben
Vor Gott ein Sündengreuel ist.
Was könnte nun
Die Geistesfreudigkeit zu⁵ unserm Beten geben,
Wo Jesu Geist und Wort nicht neue Wunder tun?

2. In Jesus’s grace alone will there be
Comfort for us and forgiveness,
Because by Satan’s deceit and cunning
Humankind’s entire life
Is an abomination of sin before God.
What now could
Give joyfulness of spirit to our praying,
Unless⁶ Jesus’s spirit and word perform new wonders?

3. Ich höre mitten in den⁷ Leiden
Ein Trostwort, so mein Jesus spricht.
Drum, o geängstigtes Gemüte,
Vertraue deines Gottes Güte,
Sein Wort besteht und fehlet nicht,

3. I hear, in the midst of my sufferings,
A word of comfort that my Jesus declares.
Thus, O anguished mind,
Trust your God’s goodness;

GENERAL NOTE: This text draws on one of the oldest Lutheran chorales, a paraphrase and expansion of Psalm 130 that appeared in the 1524 Erfurt Enchiridion. The hymn’s first and last stanzas are presented intact as the first and last movements of the cantata, and the inner movements paraphrase the inner stanzas.

¹“Erhöhren” carries the sense of “to hear” in its special sense of “to listen to with compliance or assent,” often employed in situations of acceding to or granting of a request or prayer.

²The uncommon separable verb “herneigen” (“to incline here”) is employed, e.g., in Isaiah 55:3, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Neiget eure Ohren her, und kommt her zu mir” (“Incline your ears here [to me], and come here to me”). There is, however, no significant difference in meaning between “herneigen” and “neigen.”

³Curiously, most modern English renderings of the libretto here read in the singular. But in this hymn, “dein gnädig Ohr” is plural—a poetically clipped version of “deine gnädigen Ohren” (“your gracious ears”)—as is evident from the “sie” in the next line, which has to be read as the plural “them.” That is, the “sie” as a singular would have required the gender of its antecedent noun to be feminine. But the gender of the antecedent noun here is neuter, “das Ohr.” And if the apposite unclipped phrase were “dein gnädiges Ohr,” line 4 would have to read “Und meiner Bitt es öffne” (“And open it to [hear] my plea”).

⁴“Unrecht” was used as a synonym for “Ungerechtigkeit” (“injustice”); but it was also often used in the Luther Bibles in the sense of “Abweichung von Gottes Gebot” (“deviating from God’s commandment”), namely when the Greek source texts employed the term “anomia” (“lawlessness”); e.g., in 1 John 3:4, “Wer Sünde tut, der tut auch Unrecht, und die Sünde ist das Unrecht” (“Whoever commits sin, he commits lawlessness also, and sin is lawlessness”).

⁵Some modern editions give “bei” (“with,” or “for,” or “in”) here where Bach’s original surviving materials give “zu” (“to”).

⁶In older German, the expression “wo nicht” was a synonym for “wenn nicht” (“unless,” or “if not”).

⁷Some modern editions give the singular “in dem Leiden” (literally, “in the suffering”) here where Bach’s original surviving materials give “in den Leiden” (literally, “in the sufferings”).

Sein Trost wird niemals von dir scheiden!

His word endures and does not fail,⁸
His comfort will never part from you.

4. Ach! Dass mein Glaube noch so schwach,
Und dass ich mein Vertrauen
Auf feuchtem⁹ Grunde muss erbauen!
Wie ofte müssen neue Zeichen
Mein Herz erweichen!
Wie? kennst du deinen Helfer nicht,
Der nur ein einzig Trostwort spricht,
Und gleich erscheint,
Eh deine Schwachheit es vermeint,
Die Rettungsstunde.
Vertraue nur der Allmachtshand und seiner
Wahrheit Munde!

4. Ah! That my faith [is] still so weak,
And that I have to build my trust
Upon soggy ground!
How often [it is that] new signs [from Jesus] have to
Soften¹⁰ my heart [to proper faith]!¹¹
[But] what [are you saying]? Do you not know your helper,
[The one] who but declares a single word of comfort
And immediately there appears,
Before your [spiritual] weakness has a conception of it,
The hour of rescue?
Trust only the Almighty's¹² [pledging of] deed and his truth's
word.¹³

5. Wenn meine Trübsal als mit Ketten
Ein Unglück an dem andern hält,
So wird mich doch mein Heil erretten,
Dass alles plötzlich von mir fällt.

5. If my tribulation, as [though] by chains,
Joins one misfortune to the other,
Then my salvation [Jesus] will yet rescue me,
[Such] that all [misfortune] suddenly falls away from me.

⁸Grammatically, “Sein Wort fehlet nicht” could have the sense of “His [i.e., God’s] word is not absent” or “His word does not absent itself,” but the expression was a very common one in German Lutheran discourse, where it was employed in the sense of “His [i.e., God’s] word does not fail [or, ‘err’].”

⁹Some modern editions give “Auf seichtem Grunde” (“Upon shallow ground”) here where Bach’s original surviving materials give “Auf feuchtem Grunde” (“Upon soggy ground”).

¹⁰“Mein Herz erweichen” does not mean “weaken my heart.” This line concerns not a “weak” versus a “strong” heart, but a “soft/tender” versus a “hard” heart; see fn. 11 below.

¹¹There are many instances in the New Testament of Jesus doing “signs and wonders” (Luther Bibles, “Zeichen und Wunder”; note the mention of Jesus’s “wonders” in the last line of movement 2, above) that are meant to evoke belief or faith in him. The notion of signs being displayed to “soften the heart” (i.e., to evoke proper belief in the truth of what the speaker performing the signs declares) is derived, e.g., from Exodus 10:1, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Und der HERR sprach zu Mose: Gehe hinein zu Pharao, denn ich habe sein und seiner Knechte Herz verhärtet, auf dass ich diese meine Zeichen unter ihnen tue, und dass du verkündigest für den Ohren deiner Kinder und deiner Kindes Kinder, was ich in Egypten ausgerichtet habe, und wie ich meine Zeichen unter ihnen beweiset/bewiesen habe, dass ihr wisset: Ich bin der HERR” (“And the LORD declared to Moses: ‘Go in unto Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and [the heart] of his servants, so that I may perform these my signs among them [which will then soften their heart, making clear to them my divine presence and power], and that you may proclaim before the ears of your children, and of your children’s children, what I in Egypt have carried out, and how I have shown my signs among them, that you may know: I am the LORD [God]”).

¹²“Allmachtshand,” strictly speaking, would mean “hand of omnipotence/almightiness.” Here “Allmachtshand” refers specifically to the “hand of ‘the Almighty’ [i.e., of God],” which more conventionally would be given as “Hand des Allmächtigen” (the scansion of which would not work in this line).

¹³The sense of this line is typically rendered as “Trust but the hand of the Almighty and the truth of his mouth,” and this is certainly less daft-sounding than a rendering that accommodates more directly what the German text appears to say: “Trust but the hand of the Almighty and the mouth of his truth.” That is, the “der” in “der Allmachtshand” is dative, whereas the “seiner” in “seiner Wahrheit Munde” is feminine genitive, applying to “Wahrheit,” not to (the masculine noun) “Munde.” But the historical sense of this language here is most likely a bit different altogether: with the use of “Hand und Mund” the poet is apparently drawing (a bit clumsily) on the old German legal formula “Versprechen/Schwören mit Mund und Hand” (figuratively, the “pledging of word and deed”; literally, the “promising/swearing with/of mouth and hand”), and so the sense of the cantata line would probably be “Trust but the Almighty’s pledging of deed and his truth’s word.”

Wie bald erscheint des Trostes Morgen
Auf diese Nacht der Not und Sorgen!

**6. Ob bei uns ist der Sünden viel,
Bei Gott ist viel mehr Gnade;
Sein Hand zu helfen hat kein Ziel,
Wie gross auch sei der Schade.
Er ist allein der gute Hirt,
Der Israel erlösen wird
Aus seinen Sünden allen.**

How soon the morning of [God's] comfort appears
Unto¹⁴ this night of distress and cares!

**6. Though with us there is much of sin,
With God there is much more grace;
[The power of] his saving hand has no limit,¹⁵
However great the wounds [of sin] may be.
He alone is the good shepherd
Who will redeem Israel
From all its sins.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV38 for an annotated translation

¹⁴In “Auf diese Nacht,” the “auf” is accusative—thus, “Unto this night.” (“In/At/During/After this night” would have required the dative, “Auf dieser Nacht.”)

¹⁵The sentiment of this line is presumably based on Luther’s rendering of Isaiah 59:1, “Siehe, des HERRN Hand ist nicht zu kurz, dass er nicht helfen könne” (“Look, the [extent of the power of the] hand of the LORD is not too short [for it to be the case] that he may not be able to help/save [us]”).