

“Die Elenden sollen essen” BWV 75

Erster Teil

1. Die Elenden sollen essen, dass sie satt werden,
und die nach dem Herrn fragen, werden ihn
preisen. Euer Herz soll ewiglich leben.¹

2. Was hilft des Purpurs Majestät, da sie vergeht?
Was hilft der grösste Überfluss,
Weil alles, so wir sehen, verschwinden muss?
Was hilft der Kitzel eitler Sinnen,
Denn unser Leib muss selbst von hinnen?
Ach, wie geschwind ist es geschehen,
Dass Reichtum, Wollust, Pracht
Den Geist zur Hölle macht!

3. Mein Jesus soll mein alles sein!
Mein Purpur ist sein teures Blut,
Er selbst mein allerhöchstes Gut,
Und seines Geistes Liebesglut
Mein allersüßster Freudenwein.

4. Gott stürzet und erhöhet in Zeit und Ewigkeit.
Wer in der Welt den Himmel sucht,
Wird dort verflucht.
Wer aber hier die Hölle übersteht,

Part 1

1. *The afflicted shall eat, such that they become sated, and those who ask after the Lord will praise him. Your² heart shall live eternally.*

2. What use is purple’s majesty, given that it dies away?
What use is the greatest overabundance,
Because everything that we see must vanish?
What use is the stimulation³ of idle senses,
For our body itself must [depart] from here [at death]?
Ah, how quickly it happens,
That wealth, pleasure, splendor
Make [life for] the spirit hell.⁴

3. My Jesus shall be my everything.
His precious blood is my [imperishable] purple,⁵
He himself my very highest good,
And his spirit’s fervor of love⁶
My very sweetest wine of joy.

4. God hurls [this person down] and lifts [that one] up,⁷ in time and eternity.⁸
Whoever seeks heaven in the world
Will be accursed there⁹ [in hell’s eternity].

¹Psalm 22:27.

²“Your” refers to “the afflicted.” Such sudden changes of third-person to second-person are common in the Hebrew Bible. The ancient Greek and Latin translations of the Bible here give not “your” but “their.”

³“Kitzel” is apparently used here in its sense of “Reizung” (“stimulation”).

⁴Going back to the eighteenth century, the phrase “jemandem das Leben zur Hölle machen” meant “to make life hell for someone.”

⁵“Purple” here refers to a royal robe of that color, but also to blood. This line is proclaiming that as redemption for sin, the “king” Jesus shed his blood, which is a “purple” that will not “perish” (see line 1 of movement 2). This line is drawing on 1 Peter 1:18-19, “[Ihr] wisset, dass ihr ... nicht mit vergänglichem Silber oder Gold erlöst seid ... sondern mit dem teuren Blut Christi” (“You know that you are not redeemed with perishable silver or gold but with the precious [imperishable] blood of Christ”).

⁶This line draws on the language of Song of Songs 8:6, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Liebe ist stark, wie der Tod; ... ihre Glut ist feurig und eine Flamme des HERRN” (“Love is strong, like death; its fervor is fiery and a flame of the LORD”).

⁷This line draws on the language of Psalm 75:8, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Gott ist Richter, der diesen niedriget und jenen erhöhet” (“God is [the] judge who brings this one low and lifts that one up”).

⁸“Time” here refers to this world/age, and “eternity” to the next.

⁹The words “hier” (“here”) and “dort” (“there”) are often used in Lutheran cantata poetry for the contrast between this life and the next, earth and heaven/hell, time and eternity. The “there” in line 3 refers to hell (after death), not to “the world” where one seeks “heaven” (in this life).

Wird dort erfreut.

5. Ich nehme mein Leiden mit Freuden auf mich.
Wer Lazarus' Plagen
Geduldig ertragen,
Den nehmen die Engel zu sich.

6. Indes schenkt Gott ein gut Gewissen,
Dabei ein Christe kann ein kleines Gut
Mit grosser Lust geniessen.
Ja, führt er auch durch lange Not zum Tod,
So ist es doch am Ende wohlgetan.

**7. Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan;
Muss ich den Kelch gleich schmecken,
Der bitter ist nach meinem Wahn,
Lass ich mich doch nicht schrecken,
Weil doch zuletzt
Ich werd ergötzt
Mit süssem Trost im Herzen;
Da weichen alle Schmerzen.**¹¹

Zweiter Teil

8. [Sinfonia]

9. Nur eines kränkt ein christliches Gemüte:
Wenn es an seines Geistes Armut denkt.
Es gläubt zwar Gottes Güte,
Die alles neu erschafft;

But whoever survives hell here [in earth's time]
Will be gladdened there [in heaven's eternity].

5. I accept my suffering with joy.
Whoever has borne Lazarus' torments
Patiently,
The angels will take him to themselves [in heaven].¹⁰

6. God meanwhile bestows a clear conscience,
Whereby a Christian can enjoy
A small good with great delight.
Yes, even if he [God] leads [Christians] through extended
distress toward death,
Then at the end it [what God does] is, yet, done well.

**7. What God does is done well;
If right now I must taste the cup [of suffering]¹²
That is bitter according to my way of thinking,¹³
I do not let myself yet be afraid,
Because yet at the last
I will be cheered
With sweet comfort in my heart;
There [at the last] all sorrows give way.**

Part 2

8. [Sinfonia]

9. Only one thing debilitates¹⁴ a Christian [frame of] mind:
When it contemplates the poverty of its spirit.
It [the mind] believes, to be sure, [in] God's goodness
That makes all things new;¹⁵

¹⁰Luke 16:19-31 reports that at his death the impoverished man Lazarus, who had been tormented on earth with festering sores, was carried by angels to "Abraham's bosom." 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). Western Christianity came to use "Abraham's bosom" as a designation for heaven.

¹¹A stanza of the hymn "Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan."

¹²In biblical language, "the cup" is a metaphor for what God has to offer a person, whether positive (e.g., "the cup of consolation") or negative (e.g., "the cup of wrath," and "the cup of suffering").

¹³Here, "Wahn" is not exactly "delusion" (the meaning in modern German). In older German, "Wahn" was used as a synonym for "Meinung" ("opinion," "what one thinks"), more specifically sometimes in the sense of an "unsichere Annahme" ("arguable assumption"). The idea is not that it is deluded or even wrong to judge the cup of suffering to be bitter, but that such a judgment is incomplete. In Lutheran thought, bitterness of suffering was not a bad thing—it was in the nature of things, and was good for you.

¹⁴"Kränken" is apparently being used here in its older German sense of "schwächen" ("to weaken/debilitate"); see also line 5 of this movement.

¹⁵The language from several biblical passages is conflated here, but the main sentiments stem from Revelation 21:5, where God declares "Siehe, ich mache alles neu" ("Look, I make all things new"). For its rhyme with "Kraft" ("strength"), "erschafft" ("creates") is used in the cantata libretto in place of the "macht" ("makes/creates") in Revelation.

Doch mangelt ihm die Kraft,
Dem überirdischen Leben
Das Wachstum und die Frucht zu geben.

10. Jesus macht mich geistlich reich.
Kann ich seinen Geist empfangen,
Will ich weiter nichts verlangen;
Denn mein Leben wächst zugleich.

11. Wer nur in Jesu bleibt,
Die Selbstverleugnung treibt,
Dass er in Gottes Liebe sich gläubig übe,
Hat, wenn das Irdische verschwunden,
Sich selbst und Gott gefunden.

12. Mein Herze glaubt und liebt.
Denn Jesu süsse Flammen,
Aus den' die meinen stammen,
Gehn über mich zusammen,
Weil er sich mir ergibt.

13. O Armut, der kein Reichtum gleicht!
Wenn aus dem Herzen
Die ganze Welt entweicht
Und Jesus nur allein regiert.¹⁸
So wird ein Christ zu Gott geführt.
Gib, Gott, dass wir es nicht verscherzen!

**14. Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan,
Dabei will ich verbleiben.
Es mag mich auf die rauhe Bahn
Not, Tod und Elend treiben,
So wird Gott mich
Ganz väterlich
In seinen Armen halten;
Drum lass ich ihn nur walten.**²²

Yet it lacks the strength
To provide to the transcendent life
The [crop] growth and the fruit [harvested for salvation].¹⁶

10. Jesus makes me spiritually rich.
If I can receive his spirit
I will long for nothing further;
For my [material] life thrives likewise.

11. Whoever just abides in Jesus,
[Whoever] exercises self-denial,
Such that in God's love he might exercise belief,
Has, when what is earthly has vanished,
Discovered himself and God.

12. My heart believes and loves.
For Jesus' sweet flames [of love],¹⁷
From which my own [flames of love] emanate,
Coalesce upon me,
Because he gives himself over to me.

13. Oh [welcome] poverty that no wealth equals:
When the entire world
Flees out of the heart¹⁹
And Jesus alone just rules [in our hearts]!²⁰
In this way a Christian is led to God.
Grant, God, that we do not squander²¹ it.

**14. What God does is done well—
I will abide by this.
If distress, death, and affliction may
Drive me on the rough course [of life],
Then God will,
Most paternally,
Hold me in his arms;
That is why I just let him rule.**

¹⁶“The fruit” spoken of here is the “Frucht zum ewigen Leben” (“fruit [that is harvested] unto eternal life”) of John 4:36.

¹⁷With regard to “flames of love,” see fn. 5, above.

¹⁸Bach's own materials have a period at the end of this line, not a comma (and the next word, “So,” is indeed capitalized).

¹⁹The world's exit from the believer's heart is a complement, in Lutheran theology, to Jesus's entry and indwelling. A similar sentiment appears in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, in movement 65: “Mache dich, mein Herze, rein ... Welt, geh aus, lass Jesum ein” (“Make yourself pure, my heart ... World, get out [of my heart]; let Jesus in”).

²⁰Alluding to Colossians 3:15, “Der Friede Gottes regiere in euren Herzen” (“May the peace of God rule in your hearts”).

²¹In this older German, “verscherzen” does not mean “to make fun of”; it is a synonym for “verschwenden” (“to squander”).

²²A stanza of the hymn “Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan.”

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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