

"Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" BWV 80

**1. Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott,  
Ein gute Wehr und Waffen;  
Er hilft uns frei aus aller Not,  
Die uns jetzt hat betroffen.  
Der alte böse Feind,  
Mit Ernst ers jetzt meint,  
Gross Macht und viel List  
Sein grausam Rüstung ist,  
Auf Erd ist nicht seinsgleichen.<sup>1</sup>**

**A secure fortress is our God,<sup>2</sup>  
A good defense and weaponry;  
He helps free us from every distress  
That has befallen us now.  
The ancient wicked enemy [Satan],  
He means it seriously now,  
Great power and much cunning  
Is his gruesome suit of armor;  
On earth there is not his equal.**

2. Alles, was von Gott geboren,  
Ist zum Siegen auserkoren.  
Wer bei Christi Blutpanier  
In der Taufe Treu geschworen,  
Siegt im Geiste für und für.

Everything born of God  
Is chosen for triumph.  
Whoever in baptism has sworn fealty  
By Christ's banner of blood,<sup>3</sup>  
Triumphs in the [Holy] Spirit<sup>4</sup> ever and ever.

**Mit unser Macht is nichts getan,  
Wir sind gar bald verloren;  
Es streit' vor uns der rechte Mann,  
Den Gott hat selbst erkoren.  
Fragst du, wer der ist?  
Er heisst Jesus Christ,  
Der Herre Zebaoth,  
Und ist kein andrer Gott,  
Das Feld muss er behalten.<sup>5</sup>**

**With our own power nothing is done,  
We are quite soon lost.  
The right<sup>6</sup> man fights for us,<sup>7</sup>  
[This man] whom God himself has chosen.  
You ask who he is?  
He is called Jesus Christ,  
The Lord of Sabaoth,<sup>8</sup>  
And [Christ] is no other god;<sup>9</sup>  
He must hold the battlefield.**

<sup>1</sup>Stanza 1 of the hymn.

<sup>2</sup>This hymn of Luther's is extremely well-known in English as "A Mighty Fortress is our God," but the meaning of the German "feste Burg" is slightly different, more in line with the opening stanza's notion of being safe from attack within a refuge, as opposed to being a place out of which fighting works well.

<sup>3</sup>Christ's "banner of blood" is the cross.

<sup>4</sup>The "im Geiste" here is not simply "in the spirit" but "in [God] the [Holy] Spirit." In Mark 3:7-8, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, John the Baptist declares, "Es kommt einer nach mir, der ist stärker denn ich; ... Ich taufe euch mit Wasser, aber er wird euch mit dem H. Geist taufen" ("After me, there will come one who is mightier than I; ... I baptize you with water, but he [Jesus Christ] will baptize you [not simply with water but also] with the Holy Spirit").

<sup>5</sup>Stanza 2 of "Ein feste Burg."

<sup>6</sup>Jesus, according to Christian reading of Psalm 110:1 (a verse quoted frequently in the New Testament) is now "at the right hand of God [the Father]." In Exodus 15:3, the Luther Bibles of Bach's day read "Der HERR ist der rechte Kriegsmann" ("The Lord is the right[-hand] man of war").

<sup>7</sup>The set phrase that God "fights for [on behalf of]" his people, is frequent in the Bible. "Vor" and "für" were interchangeable in older German, and in this instance the "uns" in "vor uns" is to be understood as accusative, not dative. (A dative "streitet für uns" or "streitet vor uns" would mean "fights out in front of us [as our leader]").

<sup>8</sup>The "Lord of Sabaoth" (or "Lord of Hosts") is an ancient title for God as divine warrior who leads the armies of Israel. Luther applies the army title to Jesus, who as the "second person of the Trinity," is the same god as ancient Israel's God (see the next line in this stanza).

<sup>9</sup>That is, Jesus is God, but not a different god from ancient Israel's God. Among the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:3 reads, in the Luther Bibles of Bach day, "Du solt keine andere Götter neben mir haben" ("You shall have no other gods besides me [the

3. Erwäge doch,  
Kind Gottes, die so grosse Liebe,  
Da Jesus sich  
Mit seinem Blute dir verschriebe,  
Womit er dich  
Zum Kriege<sup>10</sup> wider Satans Heer  
Und wider Welt und Sünde  
Geworben hat!  
Gib nicht in deiner Seele  
Dem Satan und den Lastern statt!  
Lass nicht dein Herz,  
Den Himmel Gottes auf der Erden,  
Zur Wüste werden!  
Bereue deine Schuld mit Schmerz,  
Dass Christi Geist mit dir sich fest verbinde!

Consider well,  
Child of God, this love so great,  
When Jesus  
Committed himself to you by his blood;  
Whereby,  
For the war against Satan's host  
And against the world and sin,  
He has recruited you.  
Do not allow in your soul  
Satan and vices.  
Do not let your heart,  
God's paradise on earth,  
Become a wasteland.  
Rue your guilt with pain,  
That the Spirit of Christ<sup>11</sup> may securely bond itself to you.

4. Komm in mein Herzenshaus,  
Herr Jesu, mein Verlangen!  
Treib Welt und Satan aus,  
Und lass dein Bild in mir erneuert prangen!  
Weg, schnöder Sündengraus!

Come into my heart as your house,  
Lord Jesus, my desire.  
Drive world and Satan out,  
And let your image shine in me [who is] renewed.<sup>12</sup>  
Away, sin, you odious horror!

**5. Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel wär  
Und wollten uns gar verschlingen,  
So fürchten wir uns nicht so sehr,  
Es soll uns doch gelingen.  
Der Fürst dieser Welt,**

**And if the world were filled with devils  
Who would want to devour us,  
Then we should not be much afraid;  
It shall still go well for us.  
The prince of this world [Satan],<sup>14</sup>**

God of ancient Israel]). In Christian teaching, this was understood to mean no other gods than God who is one in “substance” but a Trinity of “persons”: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), God the Holy Spirit.

<sup>10</sup>Some modern editions have mistranscribed “Kriege” (“war”) as “Siege” (“victory”).

<sup>11</sup>The “Spirit of Christ” (and the “Spirit of God”) was traditionally understood to be the “Holy Spirit,” the third person of the Trinity. This line is an allusion to Romans 8:9, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Ihr aber seid nicht fleischlich, sondern geistlich, so anders Gottes Geist in euch wohnt. Wer aber Christus Geist nicht hat, der ist nicht sein” (“You [plural], however, are not fleshly, but spiritual, if then the Spirit of God dwells in you. But whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ [dwelling in him], he [that person] is not his [Christ's]).

<sup>12</sup>The German text of this line is potentially confusing. It might seem straightforwardly to affirm that the divine image should “shine again/anew/renewed in me.” But the meaning is a bit different, and its biblical background is complicated. The wording of the cantata line reflects Luther's subtle but theologically significant understanding of Colossians 3:9-11, which he rendered as “Lüget nicht untereinander; ziehet den alten Menschen mit seinen Werken aus und ziehet den neuen an, der da *erneuert* wird zu der Erkenntnis, nach dem Ebenbilde des, der ihn geschaffen hat: da nicht ist Grieche, Jude, Beschneidung, Vorhaut, Ungrieche, Scythe, Knecht, Freier; sondern alles und in allen Christus” (“Do not lie to one another; put off the old man [that is, the fallen Adam] and his works and put on the new [that is, the sinless Christ, who is the ‘new man’], which is being *renewed* in knowledge according to the *image* of him who has created him: where there is no Greek, Jew, circumcision, foreskin, non-Greek, Scythian, servant, free man; rather all, and in all, is Christ”). In Luther's reading of Paul's letter, a person who has “put on” the “new man” (Christ, the “new Adam”) is renewed according to the image of God. A person's whole being as the “image of God” is restored by union with Christ (hence the talk of Christ's secure bonding at the end of the previous movement in the cantata), and Christ is the very “image of the invisible God,” according to Colossians 1:15. So it is not God's image itself that is renovated; more exactly, fallen human beings are made new into God's image. The cantata line, then, would be speaking of a renewed person, not of a radiance anew or of God's image being made new.

<sup>14</sup>“The prince of this world” is the Gospel of John's term, perhaps surprisingly, for Satan (12:31, 14:30, 16:11); the Hebrew equivalent, “sar ha-olam,” is employed in rabbinic writings to refer to God, not to Satan.

**Wie saur er sich stellt,  
Tut er uns doch nicht,  
Das macht, er ist gericht',  
Ein Wörtlein kann ihn fällen.<sup>13</sup>**

**However fermented he acts,  
Still does nothing to us;  
That is, he is judged [by God];<sup>15</sup>  
One little word [of God's]<sup>16</sup> can fell him.**

6. So stehe dann  
Bei Christi blutgefärbten Fahne,  
O Seele, fest  
Und glaube, dass dein Haupt dich nicht verlässt,  
Ja, dass sein Sieg  
Auch dir den Weg zu deiner Krone bahne!  
Tritt freudig an den Krieg!  
Wirst du nur Gottes Wort  
So hören als bewahren,  
So wird der Feind  
Gezwungen auszufahren,  
Dein Heiland bleibt dein Hort.

So stand secure, then,  
By Christ's blood-tinged flag,<sup>17</sup>  
Oh soul,  
And believe that your head [Christ]<sup>18</sup> will not desert you;  
Yes, that his triumph [on the cross]  
May pave the way for even<sup>19</sup> you to your crown [of  
glory].<sup>20</sup>  
Joyfully enter into the war.  
If you only will both hear and keep  
God's word,  
Then the enemy [Satan]  
Will be forcibly cast out;<sup>21</sup>  
Your savior remains your refuge.

7. Wie selig sind doch die, die Gott im Munde tragen,    How blessed indeed are they who bear God, by mouth;<sup>22</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Stanza 3 of "Ein feste Burg."

<sup>15</sup>According to John 16:7-11, "der Fürst dieser Welt gerichtet ist" ("The prince of this world [Satan] is judged [by God]"), and therefore cannot have ultimate power over the Christian believer.

<sup>16</sup>It was understood from Hebrews 4:12 that God's word was a "sword" that could fell anything and everything; in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, the verse reads "Denn das Wort Gottes ist lebendig und kräftig und schärfer denn kein zweischneidig Schwert" ("For the word of God is alive and powerful and sharper than any double-edged sword").

<sup>17</sup>Christ's "blood-tinged flag" is the cross.

<sup>18</sup>The New Testament continually refers to the Christian community, or the church, as the "members" of "the body of Christ" (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:27), such that Jesus is the "head" of this body (e.g., Colossians 1:18).

<sup>19</sup>The word "auch" here apparently means not "also" but "even," given that this line quotes from 1 Thessalonians 2:19, as explained in the note on the "crown [of glory]," immediately below.

<sup>20</sup>The "crown of glory" is given to Christian believers at the End Time. This understanding is based on 1 Thessalonians 2:19, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, "Wer ist unser Hoffnung oder Freude, oder Krone des Ruhms? Seid nicht auch ihr vor unserm HERRN Jesus Christus zu seiner Zukunft?" ("Who is our hope or joy, or crown of glory? Will not there be even you [fellow believers] before [the face of] our Lord Jesus Christ at his parousia [Second Coming]?").

<sup>21</sup>Forms of the verb "ausfahren" are used in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day for the exorcising or casting out of demons (e.g., in Luke 8:29 and 14:11).

<sup>22</sup>"Gott im Munde tragen" can easily be misunderstood as a reference to the sacrament of communion, where the partakers, according to Lutheran doctrine, place God, in the form of the physical presence of Jesus "in," "with," and "under/among" the consecrated bread and wine, into their mouths. But this line is, instead, an allusion to Romans 10:10, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "So man von Herzen gläubet, so wird man gerecht; und so man mit dem Munde bekennet, so wird man selig" ("If one believes [has faith, in Jesus] from the heart, then one becomes justified [for eternal salvation]; and if one acknowledges [Jesus] with the mouth, then one becomes [eternally] blessed"). That is to say, "Gott im Munde tragen" here means "to verbally acknowledge God." The somewhat awkward and clumsy use of the verb "tragen" here stems from the fact that these lines were adapted from another libretto, Bach's Cantata 80a, meant for a different liturgical occasion, which reads "Wie selig ist der Leib, der, Jesu, dich getragen; / Doch selger ist das Herz, das dich im Glauben trägt!" ("How blessed is the body [namely, the womb ("Mutterleib") of Mary, your mother] that bore you, Jesus; / Yet more blessed is the heart that bears you, by faith"); the wording of this earlier cantata text derives from Luke 11:27, "Selig ist der Leib, der dich getragen hat" ("Blessed is the [mother's] body that has borne you [Jesus]").

Doch selger ist das Herz, das ihn im Glauben trägt!  
Es bleibet unbesiegt und kann die Feinde schlagen  
Und wird zuletzt gekrönt, wenn es den Tod erlegt.

**8. Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn  
Und kein Dank dazu haben;  
Er ist bei uns wohl auf dem Plan  
Mit seinem Geist und Gaben.  
Nehmen sie uns den Leib,  
Gut, Ehr, Kind und Weib:  
Lass fahren dahin,  
Sie habens kein Gewinn,  
Das Reich muss uns doch bleiben.**<sup>25</sup>

Yet more blessed is the heart that bears him, by faith!  
It [faith] remains unvanquished and can strike down the  
enemies,  
And will finally be crowned when it slays<sup>23</sup> death.<sup>24</sup>

**They [Satan and his minions] shall let the word [of God]  
stand,  
And have no commendation for it.<sup>26</sup>  
He [God's word, Jesus]<sup>27</sup> is surely by us on the plain [of  
battle],  
With his Spirit and gifts.  
If they may take from us our body,  
Goods, honor, child and wife,  
Let [these] go over there [to them];<sup>28</sup>  
They [Satan and his minions] have, in that, no [real]  
spoils;  
To us, indeed, must the kingdom [of heaven] remain.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV80> for an annotated translation

<sup>23</sup>With the word “erlegen” (“to slay”), the poet is playing on the word “legen” (“to lay”) in 1 Corinthians 15:25 (this verse, in turn, is quoting from Psalm 110:1), “Er muss aber herrschen, bis dass er alle seine Feinde unter seine Füße lege” (“He [Jesus] must rule [the kingdom of God] until he may lay all his enemies beneath his feet”).

<sup>24</sup>Death is “the final enemy” (“der letzte Feind”), according to 1 Corinthians 15:26.

<sup>25</sup>Stanza 4 of “Ein feste Burg.”

<sup>26</sup>“Kein Dank,” as an expression held over from Middle High German, means “no recognition/commendation.” An old German proverb states “Was einer tun muss, da sagt man ihm keinen Dank um” (“About what one has [no choice but] to do, to him there is no commendation said”). It is not through some sort of liberality of theirs that Satan and his minions “let the word [of God] stand.” They will lose the fight because, with “him” (Jesus) on the battlefield, there is no possibility of their winning.

<sup>27</sup>In line 1, “das Wort” is understood to mean “the word of God.” In line 3, the “he” refers to Jesus, who is the incarnation of the word of God, according to John 1. Thus the hymn’s grammatically masculine noun “er” (for “der Jesus”) takes as its antecedent a neuter “es” (from “das Wort”).

<sup>28</sup>These lines are meant to be understood as contrasting earthly and heavenly comforts and fears, as explained in Matthew 10:7 and 10:28, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Das Himmelreich ist nahe ... Fürchtet euch nicht für denen die den Leib töten, und die Seele nicht mögen töten; fürchtet euch aber vielmehr für dem der Leib und Seele verderben mag in die Hölle” (“The kingdom of heaven is near ... Be not afraid in the face of those who kill your body and do not have the possibility of killing the soul; but do be much more afraid in the face of him [namely, God] who has the possibility of dooming your body and soul into hell”).