

“O Jesu Christ, meins Lebens Licht” BWV 118

**1. O Jesu Christ, meins Lebens Licht,
Mein Hort, mein Trost, mein Zuversicht,
Auf Erden bin ich nur ein Gast,
Und drückt mich sehr der Sünden Last.**

**1. Oh Jesus Christ, my life's light,
My refuge, my comfort, my hope,
On earth I am only a stranger¹
And the burden of [my] sins² oppresses me greatly.**

GENERAL NOTE: Bach's autograph score of the first version of this motet, BWV 118.1, scored for voices and brass instruments, includes only the first stanza of this many-stanza hymn. The instrumentation suggests the work's use in a procession, implying that multiple stanzas were performed. The later version known as BWV 118.2, with strings, woodwinds, and basso continuo, more explicitly calls for repetition with multiple stanzas, but does not specify which ones beyond the first. Modern performances tend to present stanzas 1 and 12, or sometimes 1 and 2 along with one of the other stanzas we have provided above (we give the wordings of the Wagner Gesangbuch of 1697, which Bach owned).

¹The word “Gast” usually meant “guest” or “visitor.” In Luther's biblical language, however, the word “Gast” was often used in the related but somewhat different sense of “a person who is unknown, a stranger” (the word “guest” in the sense of a “stranger” or “foreigner” is also encountered sometimes in older English). It is in this latter sense that the word is famously employed in Luther's rendering of Psalm 119:19, “Ich bin ein Gast auf Erden” (“I am a stranger on earth,” i.e., I am a foreign-resident in the present world); Hebrews 11:13 uses similar language to proclaim that those who have faith are strangers and pilgrims in this life on earth, longing for the afterlife in heaven, in the world to come.

²This line speaks not of the burden of “original sin” (i.e., of sin, per se, its condition) but of the cumulative burden of one's sinful acts (as spoken of, e.g., in Psalm 38:5, “meine Sünden gehen über mein Haupt; wie eine schwere Last sind sie mir zu schwer geworden” (“[like a flood,] my sins pass over my head; like a heavy burden have they become too heavy/difficult for me”).

(Vs. 2.) Ich hab für mir ein schwere Reis
Zu dir ins himmlisch Paradeis;
Da ist mein rechtes Vaterland,
Daran du dein Blut hast gewandt.

(Vs. 9.) Dein letztes Wort lass sein mein Licht,
Wenn mir der Tod das Herz zerbricht;
Behüte mich für Ungebärd,
Wenn ich mein Haupt nun neigen werd.

(Vs. 12.) Auf deinen Abschied, Herr, ich trau,
Darauf mein letzte Heimfahrt bau;
Tu mir die Himmelstür weit auf,
Wenn ich beschliess meins Lebenslauf.

(Vs. 15.) Wie werd ich denn so fröhlich sein,
Werd singen mit den Engelein;
Und mit der Auserwählten Schar,
Ewig schauen dein Antlitz klar.

Martin Behm

(Vs. 2.) I have before me a difficult journey,
Into the heavenly paradise, to you;
My true [home and] native land is there,
For which you have spent³ your blood.

(Vs. 9.) Let your final word ["It is accomplished!"]⁴ be
my light
When death shatters my heart;
Protect me from moral impropriety⁵
When I anon [like you]⁶ will bow my head [to die].

(Vs. 12.) Lord, I trust in your leave-taking [to go to
God, in heaven],⁷
On which [I] establish⁸ my final homeward journey [to
paradise];
Open wide the gates of heaven for me
When I conclude my life's course.

(Vs. 15.) How very joyful will I then be
[When I] will sing with the dear angels
And behold your radiant⁹ face, eternally,
With the band of [God's] elect [for salvation].

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)

³"Wenden" is here used in the sense of "aufwenden," to spend for a purpose.

⁴By "final word," the hymn writer means the last utterance of Jesus, as narrated in John 19:30, "Da nun Jesus den Essig genommen hatte, sprach er: Es ist vollbracht! Und neiget das Haupt und verschied" ("Now when Jesus [on the cross] had taken the vinegar [to drink], he declared: 'It [my earthly mission] is accomplished!' And bowed his head and departed [earthly] life"). Note that "Es ist vollbracht" is often rendered in English as "It is finished." But Luther's German is more emphatic than this, suggesting the stronger rendering "It is accomplished"; the declaration "Es ist vollbracht" connotes not simply "It has been brought to its conclusion" but, more forcefully, "It has been brought to its fullness."

⁵In modern German the adjective "ungebärdig" means "unruly" or "wild," but its various uses in older German included as a synonym for "zornig" ("wrathful") or for "unziemlich" ("unseemly/unbecoming," sometimes in the sense of "indecorous" and other times in the sense of "morally improper"). The word "ungebärdig" would have been best known from 1 Corinthians 13:5, "sie stellet sich nicht ungebärdig" ("it [love] does not behave itself unseemly [or, in other Lutheran glossings of Bach's day, 'wrathful']").

⁶With regard to bowing one's head (to die), see the citing of John 19:30 in fn. 4, above.

⁷The sense of this line is partly derived from John 14:28, "Ich gehe hin, und komme wieder zu euch. Hättet ihr mich lieb, so würdet ihr euch freuen" ("I [Jesus] am going forth [to my father in heaven] and am coming back to you [my followers on earth]. If you loved me, then you would rejoice [that I am going to the father]").

⁸"Bau," a poetically clipped version of "baue," the first person indicative form of "bauen" ("to build") appears to be employed here in a figurative sense of "aufbauen" ("to establish").

⁹"Klar" here is an adjective, not an adverb. That is, "[Ich werde] schauen dein Antlitz klar" means not "I will behold your face clearly" but "I will behold your radiant face." Some of the hymn line's sense is derived from 2 Corinthians 4:6, "Gott ... hat einen hellen Schein in unsere Herzen gegeben, dass durch uns entstände die Erleuchtung von der Erkenntnis der Klarheit Gottes in dem Angesicht Jesu Christi" ("God has furnished a clear shine into our hearts, so that through us may arise the illumination of the knowledge of God's radiance [that is emitted] in Jesus Christ's face").



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