

“Aus der Tiefen rufe ich, Herr, zu dir” BWV 131

1. *Aus der Tiefen¹ rufe ich, Herr, zu dir. Herr, höre meine Stimme, lass deine Ohren merken auf die Stimme meines Flehens!*²

1. *From the abyss I call, Lord, to you. Lord, hear my voice; let your ears attend to the voice of my supplication.*

2. *So du willst, Herr, Sünde zurechnen, Herr, wer wird bestehen? Denn bei dir ist die Vergebung, dass man dich fürchte.*³

2. *If, Lord, you will reckon sin, who will stand? For with you is forgiveness, so that you may be feared.*

**Erbarm dich mein in solcher Last,
Nimm sie aus meinem Herzen,
Dieweil du sie gebüsst hast
Am Holz mit Todesschmerzen,
Auf dass ich nicht mit grossem Weh
In meinen Sünden untergeh,
Noch ewiglich verzage.**⁴

**Have mercy on me under such a burden;
Remove it from my heart;
For you have atoned for it
On the wood [of the cross⁵] with death's pains,⁶
So that I do not perish,
With great woe, in my sins,
Nor eternally despair.**

3. *Ich harre des Herrn, meine Seele harret, und ich hoffe auf sein Wort.*⁷

3. *I await the Lord; my soul awaits, and I hope in his word.*

4. *Meine Seele wartet auf den Herrn von einer Morgenwache bis zu der andern.*⁸

4. *My soul waits for the Lord from one morning watch to the next.*

Und weil ich denn in meinem Sinn,

And because, then, even in my inclination,¹⁰

¹The word “Tiefen” in “Aus der Tiefen” is not plural in Luther’s and Bach’s German. The preposition “aus” requires dative; the “der” here is not genitive but dative feminine singular, and the “n” in “Tiefen” was conventionally added in these older German singular-dative constructions. Modern German Bibles and some editions of Cantata 131 update Luther’s text to read “Aus der Tiefe.” The Hebrew of Psalm 130 reads in the plural, and so English Bibles as a rule have rendered this phrase as “Out of the depths.”

²Psalm 130:1-2.

³Psalm 130:3-4.

⁴A stanza of “Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut,” a penitential hymn. In this cantata, references to “the Lord” in Psalm 130 effectively become references to Jesus.

⁵Compare the line from the opening chorus in Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*: “Sehet ihn aus Lieb und Huld / Holz zum Kreuze selber tragen!” (“Look at him [Jesus], out of love and favor, / Bearing [the] wood of the cross himself”).

⁶“Death’s pains” here are understood to be a type of evil “force.” Luther argued that Jesus’s sacrificial, atoning death on the cross was a victorious passing in which Jesus, as true God and human being, had experienced fully the pains of the evil cosmic power of Death itself (that is, as opposed to Jesus’s simply having experienced such great physical agonies that he died from them). This view was expressed in Luther’s commentary on Acts 2:24, which says of Jesus, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Den hat Gott auferwecket, und aufgelöset die Schmerzen des Todes” (“God [the Father] has raised him [God the Son] up [from the dead], having loosed the pains of death”).

⁷Psalm 130:5.

⁸Psalm 130:6.

¹⁰The word “Sinn” can mean “heart/mind” or “disposition/inclination.” The hymn stanza is presumably not saying “I am a sinner in my mind” (that is, “I have sinful thoughts,” or “I think I am a sinner”); rather, the sense here seems to have to do with “Original Sin,” the teaching (in Lutheran understanding) that through Adam’s Fall human nature is in its essence wholly corrupted. In this view, humans are not “sinners” because they sin — instead, they sin because humans are, by nature and inclination (and by volition), sinners.

**Wie ich zuvor geklaget,
Auch ein betrübter Sünder bin,
Den sein Gewissen naget,
Und wollte gern im Blute dein
Von Sünden abgewaschen sein
Wie David und Manasse.⁹**

**As I have lamented before,
I am a grievous sinner
Whose conscience gnaws at him,
And would gladly be washed free
Of sins in your blood,¹¹
Like David and Manasseh.¹²**

*5. Israel hoffe auf den Herrn; denn bei dem
Herrn ist die Gnade und viel Erlösung bei ihm.
Und er wird Israel erlösen aus allen seinen
Sünden.¹³*

*5. Let Israel hope in the Lord; for mercy/grace is
with the Lord, and much redemption with him. And
he will redeem Israel from all its sins.*

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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⁹A stanza of "Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut."

¹¹Blood as a cleansing material may seem strange to some modern sensibilities. The notion of washing sins away in Jesus's blood comes primarily from Revelation 1:4-5, which is rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day as "Gnade sei mit euch, ... von Jesu Christo, ... Der uns geliebet hat, und gewaschen von den Sünden mit seinem Blut" ("Grace/mercy be with you, ... from Jesus Christ, ... who has loved us and washed us from our sins with his blood"). Also relevant for this hymn stanza from the cantata is Hebrews 9:13-14, "Denn so der Ochsen und der Böcke Blut, und die Aschen von der Kuh gesprengt, heiligt die Unreinen, ... wie vielmehr wird das Blut Christi, der sich selbst ohn allen Wandel, durch den heiligen Geist, GOTT geopfert hat, unser Gewissen reinigen von den toten Werken, zu dienen dem lebendigen GOTT?" ("For if the blood of oxen and goats and the sprinkled ashes of the heifer [in the sacrificial practices of 'old' Israel] make holy the impure, ... how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the holy Spirit has offered himself [as 'the Passover lamb'], without any blemish [to make him unfit for offering as a sacrifice (Exodus 12:5)], to God [the Father], purify our conscience from dead [salvation-not-justifying] works, to serve the living God [in the 'new' Israel]?").

¹²This notion that the Old Testament figures David and Manasseh were cleansed with the blood of Jesus may seem particularly puzzling. In 2 Chronicles 33:1-20, Manasseh, the king of Judah, repents of his great sins of idolatry and successfully entreats God to allow him to start anew. In Psalm 51, David, the king of Israel, begs God for forgiveness for his great sins of committing adultery with Bathsheba and of arranging her husband Uriah's death; and in 2 Samuel 12:13, David is told in response, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, "So hat auch der HERR deine Sünde weggenommen; du wirst nicht sterben" ("Thus has the LORD also taken away your sin; you will not die"). The commentary in the Calov Bible, owned by Bach, explains, in traditional Lutheran fashion, that David received "Absolution" ("forgiveness of sins") of the kind that comes from the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹³Psalm 130:7-8.