

“Erforsche mich, Gott, und erfahre mein Herz” BWV 136

1. *Erforsche mich, Gott, und erfahre mein Herz; prüfe mich und erfahre, wie ichs meine!*¹

1. *Examine me, God, and know my heart; test me and know how I am resolved [to hate those who hate you].*²

2. Ach, dass der Fluch, so dort die Erde schlägt
Auch derer Menschen Herz getroffen!³
Wer kann auf gute Früchte hoffen,
Da dieser Fluch bis in die Seele dringet,
So dass sie Sündendornen bringet
Und Lasterdisteln trägt.
Doch wollen sich oftmals die Kinder der Höllen
In Engel des Lichtes verstellen;
Man soll bei dem verderbten Wesen
Von diesen Dornen Trauben lesen.
Ein Wolf will sich mit reiner Wolle decken,
Doch bricht ein Tag herein,
Der wird, ihr Heuchler, euch ein Schrecken,
Ja unerträglich sein.

2. Alas, that the curse that there [in Eden] smites the ground⁴
Has also beset the heart of those [earliest] people [Adam and Eve]!
Who can hope for good [spiritual] fruits,
Because this [inherited]⁵ curse pierces through to the soul,
So that it [the soul] brings forth thorns of sin
And bears thistles of vice?⁶
The children of hell do often want to
Masquerade as angels of light;⁷
One is [thus] expected—despite the corrupted essence [of human
nature]⁸—
To gather grapes from these thorns.
A wolf wants to cloak⁹ itself in pure wool;¹⁰
But a day will break
That to you, you hypocrites, will be a terror,
Yes, unbearable.

¹Psalm 139:23.

²Traditionally, English translations of the end of Psalm 139:23 read “and know my thoughts [i.e., in general],” and modern German translations give its equivalent, “und erkenne meine Gedanken.” Luther’s rendering, however, seems to point back more specifically to the previous two verses of the psalm, which speak of the psalmist’s hatred of those who hate the God of Israel. Luther gives not “und erfahre, was ich meine” (“and know what I mean/think/intend [i.e., in general]”) but “und erfahre, wie ich es meine” (“and know in what way I mean it”; or, “and know how I am resolved [i.e., in my commitment to hate those who hate you, God]”). Without an indication of Luther’s apparent linking of verse 23 with verses 21–22, movement 2 in Bach’s cantata might seem to be a non sequitur.

³Mistakenly given as “getrogen” (“[had/has] deceived”) in some modern sources, a reading that does not make sense contextually.

⁴As narrated in Genesis 3:17-19, which says that the ground will be cursed because of Adam and Eve’s breaking God’s commandment not to eat of the tree in the middle of the garden of Eden, “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”; God banishes them from Eden, and tells Adam that he and all the generations after him will have to till the land, and that thistles and thorns will sprout in the soil.

⁵See fn. 8, below.

⁶These sentiments of lines 3–6 are derived from Matthew 7:16-17, “An ihren Früchten sollt ihr sie erkennen. Kann man auch Trauben lesen von den Dornen oder Feigen von den Disteln? Also ein jeglicher guter Baum bringt gute Früchte” (“By their fruits you shall recognize them [the false prophets]. Can one gather also grapes from the thorns, or figs from the thistles? So, a good tree, of any kind, brings forth good fruits”).

⁷The language of this line is derived from 2 Corinthians 11:13-14, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “falsche Apostel und trügliche Arbeiter verstellen sich zu Christus Aposteln; und das ist auch kein Wunder, denn er selbst, der Satan, verstellt sich zum Engel des Lichtes” (“false apostles and deceiving workers masquerade as Christ’s apostles; and that also is no wonder, for he himself, Satan, masquerades as an angel of light”).

⁸The idea here, going back to Augustine, is that all humans have inherited “a corrupted essence” (in German, traditionally, “ein verderbtes Wesen”) on account of the original sin of Adam and Eve (see also fn. 4, above).

⁹“Decken” usually means simply “to cover,” but here it is used in the more specific sense of “verhüllen” (“to veil,” or “to cloak”), i.e., as a variant of the word “verstellen” (“to disguise”) in line 8.

¹⁰Here the German equivalent for “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” is alluded to: “der Wolf im Schafspelz” (literally, “the wolf in the sheep’s coat/fleece”).

3. Es kömmt ein Tag,
So das Verborgne richtet,
Vor dem die Heuchelei erzittern mag.
Denn seines Eifers Grimm vernichtet,
Was Heuchelei und List erdichtet.

3. A day [the day of the Lord]¹¹ is coming
That will judge what is hidden [within the human heart];¹²
In the face of it, hypocrisy is going to want to tremble.¹³
For the wrath¹⁴ of his [the Lord's] jealousy¹⁵ destroys
What hypocrisy and guile contrives.

4. Die Himmel selber sind nicht rein,
Wie soll es nun ein Mensch vor diesem Richter
sein?
Doch wer durch Jesu Blut gereinigt,
Im Glauben sich mit ihm vereinigt,
Weiss, dass er ihm kein hartes Urteil spricht.
Kränkt ihn die Sünde noch,
Der Mangel seiner Werke,
Er hat in Christo doch
Gerechtigkeit und Stärke.

4. [In the Lord's sight,] the heavens [the angels] themselves are not
pure;
How now, before this judge, is it to be [for] a human being?¹⁶
But whoever is purified through Jesus's blood,
United with him in faith,
Knows that he [the Lord] will pronounce no harsh judgment upon
him.
If sin yet dejects him,
[And also] the insufficiency [for salvation] of his deeds,¹⁷
In Christ he indeed has
Righteousness and strength.

5. Uns treffen zwar der Sünden Flecken,
So Adams Fall auf uns gebracht.
Allein, wer sich zu/in¹⁸ Jesu Wunden,

5. Indeed sin's stains beset us,
[The stains] that Adam's fall brought onto us.
But then, whoever has found his way in Jesus's wounds,
In the vast stream rife with blood,

¹¹In the New Testament, the "Day of the Lord" is understood to refer to the end time, when God or his messiah will punish the wicked and redeem the righteous.

¹²"Das Verborgene" does not mean "the Hidden One" (i.e., "the hidden God"). That would be "der Verborgene" (i.e., "der verborgene Gott"). The sense of this line is derived from Romans 2:16, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "... da Gott das Verborgene der Menschen durch Jesum Christus richten wird" ("[the day is coming] when God through Jesus Christ will judge what is hidden [i.e., the secret thoughts and concealed sins] of [all] human beings").

¹³Lines 1 and 3 draw on the language of Joel 2:1, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Erzittert, alle Einwohner im Lande! denn der Tag des HERREN kömmt" ("Tremble, all you inhabitants in the land, for the Day of the LORD is coming").

¹⁴In older (especially biblical) German, "Grimm" means not so much "fierceness" as "anger" or "wrath." The biblical expression "the day of wrath" is frequently given in the Luther Bibles as "der Tag des Grimms" or "der Tag des Zorns."

¹⁵"Eifer" here means not simply "zeal" or "fervor" but, more specifically, "jealousy." And the "seines" refers not to "its" (i.e., the day's [zeal]) but to "his" (i.e., the LORD's [jealousy]). The language of this line is derived from Zephaniah 1:15-18, "dieser Tag ist ein Tag des Grimmes; ... das ganze Land soll durch das Feuer seines Eifers verzehrt werden" ("this day is a day of wrath; ... the whole land shall be consumed by the fire of his [the LORD's] jealousy"). Significantly, Deuteronomy 4:24 reads, in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, "Der HERR, dein Gott, ist ... ein eifriger Gott" ("The LORD, your God, is a jealous God"). This "jealousy" was understood as analogous to the jealous and impassioned indignation of a marriage partner whose spouse is unfaithful.

¹⁶Lines 1-2 are based on Job 15:15-16, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Siehe, unter seinen Heiligen ist keiner ohne Tadel, und die Himmel sind nicht rein für ihm; wie vielmehr ein Mensch, der ein Greuel und schnöde ist" ("Look, among his [the Lord's] holy ones [i.e., here, the angels] none is blameless, and in the face of him [i.e., of his judgement], the heavens [i.e., the angels inhabiting the heavens] are not pure;" how much more [impure than the angels is] a human being, who is an abomination and odious). "The heavens" is sometimes used in the Bible (e.g., Isaiah 24:21) as a metonym for God's messengers and other beings that inhabit the skies, especially the angels. Regarding this use of the expression "die Himmel" specifically in Job 15:15, the Calov Bible (owned by Bach) says "das ist, die Engel, die im Himmel sein" ("that is, the angels that are in heaven").

¹⁷"Der Mangel seiner Werke" speaks not of "the insufficiency [in the number] of his [good] deeds." That reading would be an egregious contradiction of fundamental Lutheran belief, in which deeds are inherently insufficient for salvation.

¹⁸In their reiteration of the line "Allein, wer sich zu Jesu Wunden," Bach's original performing materials read "Allein, wer sich in Jesu Wunden"; both "zu" and "in" can be rendered in English as "in."

Dem grossen Strom¹⁹ voll Blut gefunden,
Wird dadurch wieder rein gemacht.

Is thereby made pure again.

**6. Dein Blut, der edle Saft,
Hat solche Stärk und Kraft,
Dass auch ein Tröpflein kleine
Die ganze Welt kann reine,
Ja, gar aus Teufels Rachen
Frei, los und ledig machen.²⁰**

**6. Your blood, the noble sap,²¹
Has such strength and power
That even a small droplet
Is able to make the entire world pure,
Yes, free, at liberty, and delivered²² completely
From the devil's jaws.²³**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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¹⁹In modern sources, “grossen Strom” (“vast stream”) is sometimes mistakenly given as “Gnadenstrom” (“mercy stream,” or “grace stream”).

²⁰A stanza of “Wo soll ich fliehen hin?”

²¹The blood of Jesus, said in Lutheranism to be physically present in the consecrated wine of the sacrament of communion, is often spoken of in hymns and sermons as a life-giving “Saft” (“sap/juice”). In Bach’s day, as now, the word “Blut” was sometimes employed to refer to the dark juice from plants and fruits.

²²This line takes its language from the way that Isaiah 61:1 is quoted in Luke 4:18, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Er hat mich gesandt, ... zu predigen den Gefangenen, dass sie *los* sein sollen, ... und den Zerschlagenen, dass sie *frei und ledig* sein sollen” (“He [the spirit of the LORD] has sent me to preach to the imprisoned so that they shall be *at liberty*, and to the battered so that they shall be *free and delivered*”).

²³“Rachen” does not mean “vengeance” or “rage”; “die Rache” (“vengeance,” “revenge”), for which there is no plural, is sometimes confused with “der Rachen” (“jaw”) and “die Rachen” (“jaws”).