

"Mein Gott, wie lang, ach lange?" BWV 155

1. Mein Gott, wie lang, ach lange?

Des Jammers ist¹ zuviel,
Ich sehe gar kein Ziel
Der Schmerzen und der Sorgen.
Dein süßer Gnadenblick
Hat unter Nacht und Wolken sich verborgen,
Die Liebeshand zieht sich, ach! ganz zurück,
Um Trost ist mir sehr bange.
Ich finde, was mich Armen täglich kränket,
Das Tränenmass wird stets voll eingeschenket,
Der Freudenwein gebricht;
Mir sinkt fast alle Zuversicht.

1. My God, how long, ah long?

Of misery there is too much;
Indeed I see no end whatever
To the agonies and worries.
Your sweet glance of grace
Has hidden itself beneath night and clouds;²
Your loving hand withdraws itself, ah, entirely;
I am very anxious for consolation.³
I find—which daily aggrieves wretched me—
The measure of tears⁴ is constantly poured in full,⁵
The wine of joy is lacking;⁶
Almost all my confidence sinks.

2. Du musst glauben, du musst hoffen,

Du musst Gott gelassen sein.
Jesus weiss die rechten Stunden,
Dich mit Hilfe zu erfreuen.
Wenn die trübe Zeit verschwunden,
Steht sein ganzes Herz dir offen.

2. You must believe; you must hope;

You must be resigned in God.⁷
Jesus knows the proper hours
To gladden you with salvation.⁸
When the troubled time has vanished,
His whole heart stands open to you.

3. So sei, o Seele, sei zufrieden!

Wenn es vor deinen Augen scheint,

3. So be, O soul, be at peace.¹²

When, to your eyes, it appears

¹In the poet's printed text, this reads "wird zuviel" ("becomes too much"), not "ist" ("is too much").

²This is biblical language about God's hiddenness and anger. In the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, Psalm 18:8-12 reads "... er zornig war. ... Sein Gezelt um ihn her war finster und schwarze, dicke Wolken, darinnen er verborgen war" ("... he [God] was angry. ... His tent around him was dark and [this 'tent'] was [made of] black, thick clouds, in which he was hidden").

³This line is a near verbatim quotation of Luther's idiosyncratic rendering of Isaiah 38:17, "Um Trost was mir sehr bange" ("I was very anxious for consolation"), from "The Writing of Hezekiah, King of Judah" (Isaiah 38:10-20), a poem about Hezekiah being healed of a life-threatening illness.

⁴The language of this line is derived from Psalm 80:6, "Du speisest sie mit Tränenbrot und tränkest sie mit grossem Mass voll Tränen" ("You [God] feed them [your people] with bread of tears and give them to drink in great, full measure of tears").

⁵This unfavorable decanting is doubtless meant to contrast with the favorable one in Psalm 23:5, "Du ... schenkest mir voll ein" ("You [God] pour me in full [a cup of wine at table]"); this is Luther's rendering of the King James Bible's "my cup runneth over."

⁶The language of this line is derived from John 2:3 (from the gospel portion chanted on the liturgical occasion this cantata was designed for), which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Und da es am Wein gebrach, spricht die Mutter Jesu zu ihm: Sie haben nicht Wein" ("And when the wine was lacking [i.e., when the wedding party at Cana ran out], the mother of Jesus says to him: They do not have wine").

⁷"Gelassen" is used here in its older sense of the resignation and calmness that is associated with leaving things to God's will, as opposed to its modern sense of general placidity or imperturbability.

⁸This is probably an allusion to Psalm 74:12, "Gott ist mein König von Alters her, der alle Hilfe tut, so auf Erden geschicht" ("God [the father, and Jesus] is my king from of old, who works all salvation that comes about on earth"). "Hilfe" in Luther's biblical German can mean "help" or "salvation," or both. Luther read Psalm 74 as a prefigurement of God's bringing Christian salvation.

¹²The language of this line is derived from Psalm 116:7, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Sei nun wieder zufrieden, meine Seele, denn der Herr tut dir Guts" ("Be now again at peace, my soul, for the Lord does good unto you"). The word "zufrieden" was apparently understood here in its older, general sense of being "at peace/rest" ("zu Frieden"), not in its more specific sense of being "satisfied/content." The Calov Bible, part of Bach's library, explains that the Psalm's "Sei nun wieder zufrieden" means "Kehre dich wieder zu deiner Ruhe" ("return to your rest/peace").

Als ob dein liebster Freund
 Sich ganz von dir geschieden;
 Wenn er dich kurze Zeit verlässt,
 Herz! glaube fest,
 Es wird ein Kleines sein,
 Da er für bittere Zähren
 Den⁹ Trost- und Freudenwein
 Und Honigseim für Wermut will gewähren!
 Ach! denke nicht,
 Dass er von Herzen dich betrübe,
 Er prüfet nur durch Leiden deine Liebe,
 Er machet, dass dein Herz bei trüben Stunden weine,
 Damit sein Gnadenlicht
 Dir desto lieblicher erscheine;
 Er hat, was dich ergötzt,
 Zuletz
 Zu deinen¹⁰ Trost dir vorbehalten;
 Drum lass ihn nur, o Herz, in allen¹¹ walten!

As though [Jesus]¹³ your dearest beloved [bridegroom]¹⁴
 Has entirely parted himself from you,¹⁵
 [But] when [in truth] he forsakes you for a short time,
 Heart, believe firmly:
 It will be [only] a little while,¹⁶
 Until he will bestow, in place of bitter tears,
 The wine of consolation and joy;
 And [bestow], in place of wormwood,¹⁷ raw honey.¹⁸
 Ah, do not think
 That he may grieve you from the heart;¹⁹
 He is only testing your love, through suffering;
 He makes that your heart may weep in troubled hours,
 So that his light of grace
 May thereby appear all the more lovely to you;
 He has reserved what delights you
 For last,²⁰
 For your consolations;²¹

⁹Some modern editions mistakenly give not “den” (“the”) but “dir” (“to you”).

¹⁰Modern editions give “deinem” (“your,” dative singular), but all the surviving original sources for the cantata read “deinen” (“your,” dative plural). See also fn. 21, below

¹¹Some modern editions read in the singular, “in allem” (“in every thing”). The original sources read in the plural, “in allen” (“in all things”). In this case, there is, however, no real difference in meaning.

¹³On the understanding of Jesus as “Freund,” see fn. 15, below.

¹⁴On the understanding of “[mein] Freund” as “[my] beloved/bridegroom” rather than as “[my] friend,” see fn. 15, below.

¹⁵The sentiments of lines 3–4 are derived from Song of Songs 5:6, where the female lover laments to “the daughters of Jerusalem” that her “beloved” (i.e., her fiancé, rendered as “Freund” in the Luther Bibles) has gone away. In Christian interpretation, this male lover, the bridegroom, was believed to foreshadow Christ, who would “marry” the female lover, the church. Bach’s cantata poet links Song of Songs 5:6 with John 16:16, where Jesus tells his followers that he will go away for a little while.

¹⁶The Luther Bibles of Bach’s day employ the expression “ein Kleines” to mean “a little *while*” (as opposed to “a small *thing*”) in John 14:19, John 16:16-19, and Haggai 2:6.

¹⁷A bitter herb.

¹⁸“Honigsheim” is an older term for unrefined honey, dripping directly from the honeycomb. Psalm 19:11 makes the distinction: “Sie sind köstlicher denn Gold und viel feines Gold; sie sind süsser denn Honig und Honigseim” (“They [the judgments of the LORD] are more precious [to have] than gold and [even than having] much fine gold; they are sweeter than refined honey and [even than] unrefined honey”).

¹⁹This line derives its sense from Lamentations 3:33, “Denn er nicht von Herzen die Menschen plagt und betrübt” (“For he [the LORD] does not plague and grieve people from the heart”).

²⁰These lines play on the sentiments of John 2:10 (from the gospel portion chanted on the liturgical occasion that this cantata was designed for), which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Jedermann gibt zum ersten guten Wein, und wenn sie trunken worden sind, alsdenn den geringern; du hast den guten Wein bisher behalten” (“Everyone gives/offers at first good wine; and when they [the guests] have become drunk, then the inferior [wine]; you have retained the good wine until now [i.e., for last]”).

²¹The word “Trost” (“consolation”) was used almost exclusively in the singular, and if used in the plural it would more likely be given as “Troste” or “Tröst.” (On the evident plural here in the cantata, see fn. 10, above). If a quantity distinction for “consolation” was needed, one could readily use “Tröstung” for the singular and “Tröstungen” for the plural (these words, however, have too many syllables to accommodate the scansion here). With its use of the words “Seele” (“soul”), “ergötzt” (“delights”), and either a poetically clipped form of “Troste” or an un-umlauted “Tröst” (“consolations”), this movement of the cantata appears to be alluding to the well-

So just let him rule, O heart, in all things.²²

4. Wirf, mein Herze, wirf dich noch
In des Höchsten Liebesarme,
Dass er deiner sich erbarme.
Lege deiner Sorgenjoch,
Und was dich bisher beladen,
Auf die Achseln seiner Gnaden.

4. Cast yourself, my heart, cast yourself yet
Into the loving arms of the Most High,²³
That he may have mercy on you.
Lay the yoke of your worries,
And what has burdened you until now,
Upon the shoulders of his grace.

5. **Ob sichs anliess, als wollt er nicht,
Lass dich es nicht erschrecken,
Denn wo er ist am besten mit,
Da will ers nicht entdecken.
Sein Wort lass dir gewisser sein,
Und ob dein Herz sprach lauter Nein,
So lass doch dir nicht grauen.**²⁴

5. **If it seemed as though he [God] was not willing,²⁵
Do not let it alarm you;
For where he is most present,²⁶
There he will not reveal²⁷ it.
Let his word be more certain to you,
And although your heart might say nothing but “No,”
Do not, nonetheless, let yourself be afraid.**

Salomo Franck

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV155> for an annotated translation

known text of Psalm 94:19, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis in meinem Herzen; aber deine Tröstungen ergötzten meine Seele” (“I had much grieving in my heart; but your [my God’s] consolations delighted my soul”).

²²The language of this line is derived from the line that ends the first and last stanzas of the well-known hymn “Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan,” which reads “Drum lass ich ihn nur walten” (“That is why I just let him [God] rule”).

²³“Most High” is a name used frequently in the Hebrew Bible for the Lord God of Israel. In the New Testament, God the father (but not Jesus, the son) is called “Most High.”

²⁴A stanza of “Es ist das Heil uns kommen her.”

²⁵What God might have seemed unwilling to do was satisfy people’s hope. Hope is the subject of the previous stanza of this hymn, well-known in Bach’s day.

²⁶“Mitsein” (“to be among those who are present”) is an old-fashioned separable verb.

²⁷“Entdecken” is used in its older German sense as a synonym for “abdecken” (“uncover,” “reveal”).