

"Erwünschtes Freudenlicht" BWV 184

1. Erwünschtes Freudenlicht,
Das mit dem neuen Bund anbricht
Durch Jesum, unsern Hirten!
Wir, die wir sonst in Todes Tälern irrten,
Empfinden reichlich nun,
Wie Gott zu uns den längst erwünschten Hirten
sendet,
Der unsre Seele speist
Und unsern Gang durch Wort und Geist
Zum rechten Wege wendet.
Wir, sein erwähltes Volk, empfinden seine Kraft;
In seiner Hand allein ist, was uns Labsal schafft,
Was unser Herze kräftig stärket.
Er liebt uns, seine Herde,
Die seinen Trost und Beistand merket.
Er ziehet sie vom Eitlen, von der Erde,
Auf ihn zu schauen
Und jederzeit auf seine Huld zu trauen.
O Hirte, so sich vor die Herde gibt,
Der bis ins Grab und bis in Tod sie liebt!
Sein Arm kann denen Feinden wehren,
Sein Sorgen kann uns Schafe geistlich nähren,
Ja, kömmt die Zeit, durchs finstre Tal zu gehen,
So hilft und tröstet uns sein sanfter Stab.
Drum folgen wir mit Freuden bis ins Grab.
Auf! Eilt zu ihm, verklärt vor ihm zu stehen.

1. Desired light of joy
That dawns with the new covenant
Through Jesus, our shepherd!
We, who in former times¹ strayed in valleys of death,²
Now abundantly sense
How God sends to us the long-desired shepherd,
Who will feed our soul
And who by word and spirit
Will turn our [earthly-life's] course³ to the right way.
We, his chosen people, sense his might;
In his hand alone is what provides refreshment to us,
[And] what strengthens our heart mightily.
He loves us, his flock
That is mindful of his comfort and aid.
He draws you from vain things, from the earth,⁴
To look upon him
And to trust in his favor always.
O shepherd, who gives himself for his flock,
Who loves it [his flock] unto the grave and unto death,
His arm can ward off those enemies [the grave and death];⁵
His caretaking can spiritually nourish us sheep;
Yes, when the time comes to walk through the dark valley [of
death],⁶
Then his gentle staff will help and comfort us.
Thus we will follow [him] with joy even unto the grave.
Up! Hasten to him, to stand [in your] transfigured [body]
before him.⁷

¹“Sonst” here is apparently being used in its sense as an archaic synonym for “ehedem” (“in former times,” “formerly”).

²This line is a variation on Psalm 23:4, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Und ob ich schon wanderte im finstern Tal, fürchte ich kein Unglück” (“And though I might roam in the dark valley, I [will] fear no misfortune”). The Hebrew word underlying Luther’s “finster” can mean “death-like shadow,” or “deep/dark shadow.”

³The language of these lines is derived from Psalm 119:133, “Lass meinen Gang gewiss sein in deinem Wort” (“Let my [earthly-life’s] course be certain in your word”).

⁴This language of this line is derived from John 12:32, “Und ich, wenn ich erhöht werde von der Erde, so will ich sie alle zu mir ziehen” (“And I [Jesus], if I may be lifted up from the earth [to the beam of the cross], then will I [as a spiritual magnet] draw all them [that are believers] to me”).

⁵The sense of this line draws on 1 Corinthians 15:26, “Der letzte Feind, der aufgehoben wird, ist der Tod” (“The last enemy that will be annihilated is death”).

⁶See fn. 2, above.

⁷1 Corinthians 15:51-52 proclaims that people’s bodies will come out of the grave, transformed, at the end time, when they will stand before Jesus or God the father, who according to many New Testament passages will then judge all of humanity. This line in the cantata draws specifically on Philippians 3:21, which in the idiosyncratic rendering of the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “welcher unsern nichtigen Leib verklären wird, dass er ähnlich werde seinem verklärten Leibe” (“...[Christ,] who will transfigure our transitory [earthly] body [after death], so that it might be similar to his [Christ’s] transfigured [heavenly] body”). Note that “nichtig” can mean “vain” or “worthless” or “insubstantial,” but here it seems to mean “ephemeral” or “transitory,” i.e., a synonym for “flüchtig” (“fleeting”); a leading eighteenth-century dictionary gives as one of the definitions of *nichtig*: “Keine Dauer habend, vergänglich. Der nichtige Leib, Phil. 3, 21. Ach wie nichtig, ach wie flüchtig u.s.f.” (“Not lasting; ephemeral. The transitory body, Philippians 3:21. ‘Ah, how transitory, ah, how fleeting,’ etc. [in the hymn of that name]”).

2. Gesegnete Christen, glückselige Herde,
Kommt, stellt euch bei Jesu mit Dankbarkeit ein!
Verachtet das Locken der schmeichlenden Erde,
Dass euer Vergnügen vollkommen kann sein!

2. Blessed Christians, blissful⁸ flock,
Come, appear before Jesus with gratitude.
Despise the enticing of the smarmy earth,
So that your contentment can be full.⁹

3. So freuet euch, ihr auserwählten Seelen!
Die Freude gründet sich in Jesu Herz.
Dies Labsal kann kein Mensch erzählen.
Die Freude steigt auch unterwärts
Zu denen, die in Sündenbanden lagen,
Die hat der Held aus Juda schon zuschlagen.
Ein David steht uns bei.
Ein Heldenarm macht uns von Feinden frei.
Wenn Gott mit Kraft die Herde schützt,
Wenn er im Zorn auf ihre Feinde blitzt,
Wenn er den bitteren Kreuzestod
Vor sie nicht scheuet,
So trifft sie ferner keine Not,
So lebet sie in ihrem Gott erfreuet.
Hier schmecket sie die edle Weide
Und hoffet dort vollkommne Himmelsfreude.

3. So rejoice, you chosen [for salvation] souls.¹⁰
[Eternal]¹¹ joy is grounded in [living in] Jesus's heart.¹²
No person is able to [fittingly] tell of this refreshment.
Joy climbs even downward
To those who were lying in sin's bonds;
[Jesus,] the hero from Judah has already shattered them [sin's
bonds].¹³
A "David"¹⁴ aids us.
A hero's arm frees us from enemies.
If God protects his flock with might,
If he flashes in anger at its enemies,
If, for it [the flock], he does not shy away from
His bitter death by crucifixion,
Then it [the flock] will henceforth meet no distress,
Then it will live delighted in its God.
Here [on earth] it savors the precious food [for the soul]¹⁵
And hopes for full¹⁶ joy of heaven there [in eternity].

4. Glück und Segen sind bereit,
Die geweihte Schar zu krönen.
Jesus bringt die güldne Zeit,

4. Happiness and blessing are prepared
To crown¹⁷ [to eternal life] the consecrated throng.

⁸In this movement, Christians, who are "blessed" (with eternal salvation), are probably meant to be compared specifically to the godless, who can be "glückselig" ("blissful") on earth, according to Psalm 73:12, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Siehe, das sind die Gottlosen: die sind glücklich in der Welt, und werden reich" ("Look, these are the godless: they are blissful/carefree in the world, and become rich").

⁹This line apparently paraphrases an expression in John 16:24, "... dass eure Freude vollkommen sei" ("... so that your joy may be full"), replacing the two-syllable "Freude" ("joy") with the (admittedly different but related) three-syllable "Vergnügen" ("contentment").

¹⁰That is, chosen for eternal salvation.

¹¹See fn. 10, above.

¹²Lutheran writers spoke of God's living in people's hearts. But they also spoke of Jesus's heart as the "Wohnung" ("dwelling place") of the Christian believer, and of living in Jesus's heart as a metaphor for living in heaven.

¹³In Psalm 107:10, some of God's people had been "gefangen im Zwang und Eisen" ("imprisoned [by enemies] in coercion and iron [bonds]") but were redeemed, in verse 14, when God "ihre Bande zerriss" ("broke apart their bonds").

¹⁴Jesus, like King David of Israel, is God's messiah ("anointed one").

¹⁵This line alludes to a verse from the gospel portion that was chanted at the liturgical occasion for which this cantata was designed, John 10:9, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Ich bin die Tür; so jemand durch mich eingeht, der wird selig werden, und wird ein und ausgehen und Weide finden" ("I [Jesus] am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be blessed [with eternal life], and will enter and exit, and find [the] pasturage/food [that God provides for the soul]").

¹⁶See fn. 9, above.

¹⁷The sense of this line is derived from 1 Peter 5:4, "... werdet ihr, wenn erscheinen wird der Erzhirte, die unverwelkliche Krone der Ehren empfangen" ("... when the Chief Shepherd [Jesus] will appear [at the end time], you [members of his flock] will receive the never-withering crown of honor [the crown of eternal life]"). This type of "crown" is a plaited victory wreath of laurel, olive, or ivy that otherwise (i.e., in natural circumstances) would wither.

Welche sich zu ihm gewöhnen.

Jesus brings the golden age [of God's grace]¹⁸
To those who orient themselves to him.¹⁹

**5. Herr, ich hoff je, du werdest die
In keiner Not verlassen,
Die dein Wort recht als treue Knecht
Im Herzn und Glauben fassen;
Gibst ihn'n bereit die Seligkeit
Und lässt sie nicht verderben.
O Herr, durch dich bitt ich, lass mich
Fröhlich und willig sterben.**²⁰

**5. Lord [Jesus], I ever hope that you
Will not abandon to any distress
Those who rightly take hold of your word
In heart and in faith as loyal servants;
You grant them blessedness [of salvation]²¹ already²²
And you do not let them perish.
O Lord, through you I ask [of God], let me
Die cheerfully and willingly.**

6. Guter Hirte, Trost der Deinen,
Lass uns nur dein heilig²³ Wort!
Lass dein gnädig Antlitz scheinen,
Bleibe unser Gott und Hort,
Der durch Allmachtsvolle²⁴ Hände

6. Good shepherd [Jesus], comfort of those who are yours,
Only let us have²⁵ your holy word [of truth].²⁶
Let your merciful countenance shine [upon us];
Remain our God²⁷ and stronghold
Who, by Almighty hands,²⁸

¹⁸“Die güldne Zeit” in this instance is apparently a variation on “die angenehme Zeit” of 2 Corinthians 6:2, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Jetzt ist die angenehme Zeit, jetzt ist der Tag des Heils” (“Now is the acceptable/propitious time [of mercy/grace], now is the day of salvation [in Jesus]”). Luther described the “angenehme Zeit” as a Hebraism referring to God’s “Evangelische Zeit” (“time of the gospel”), marked by forgiveness and mercy in Jesus. The Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, for example, render Psalm 69:14 as “Ich aber bete, HERR, zu dir zur angenehmen Zeit” (“But I pray, Lord, to you at the acceptable/propitious time [of mercy/grace in Christ]”).

¹⁹“Sich an/zu jemanden gewöhnen” would, on the face of it, seem simply to mean “to get/grow accustomed to someone” or “to accustom oneself to someone.” To speak in this manner about Jesus, however, may sound linguistically and theologically clumsy. In older German, the verb “gewöhnen” was also used as a synonym for “abrichten” in the sense of “to train.” Perhaps, then, “sich zu Jesum gewöhnen” should be understood as “to orient oneself to Jesus”—i.e., to grow accustomed to being trained in the ways of Jesus, such that “sich gewöhnen” would be taken as a synonym for “sich ausrichten” in the sense of “to orient oneself.”

²⁰A stanza of “O Herre Gott, dein göttlich Wort.”

²¹See fn. 22, below.

²²“Bereit” here is an older German form of “bereits” (“already”). The sense of this line is derived from John 3:18, “Wer an ihn glaubt, der wird nicht gerichtet; wer aber nicht glaubt, der ist schon gerichtet” (“Whoever believes in him [in Jesus], he will not be condemned; but whoever does not believe, he is already condemned [i.e., will not see eternal life/salvation]”).

²³Some modern editions here read “heilsam” (“wholesome”). Bach’s own performing materials and the surviving text booklets that were made available to congregants at performances of this cantata (in 1727 and 1731) read “heilig” (“holy”).

²⁴Modern editions give this adjective with a lowercase “a,” but the original sources sources give an uppercase “A,” presumably for the interpretive reasons suggested in fn. 28, below.

²⁵“Lassen einem etwas” is apparently used here as a synonym for “überlassen einem etwas” in the sense of “to part with something and let someone have/take this thing.”

²⁶The meaning of this line is not entirely clear in the absence of recognizing its biblical origin. Psalm 119:41-43 reads “HERR, lass mir deine Gnade widerfahren, deine Hilfe nach deinem Wort, ... und nimm ja nicht von meinem Munde das Wort der Wahrheit” (“LORD, let your mercy/grace befall me, let your salvation befall me according to your word, ... and do not take the word of truth, indeed, out of my mouth”).

²⁷That is, God the son (Jesus). In the next line, the work of his hands is, strictly speaking, taken to be the work of God the father, “the Almighty.” See fn. 28, below.

²⁸The somewhat unusual expression “Allmachtsvolle Händen” (i.e., with an uppercase “A”) suggests the meaning “Almighty [divine] hands” rather than simply “almighty [all-powerful] hands” or “omnipotence-filled hands.” Strictly speaking, “Allmachtsvolle” in English would be “Almightiful,” not “Almighty”; but “almightiful” is now obsolete usage, and “Almightiful” has the additional disadvantage of perhaps too readily being misconstrued as jocular. The much more usual German expression in Bach’s

Unsern Gang zum Leben wende!

May²⁹ turn our [earthly-life's] course³⁰ to [eternal] life.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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day for “allmachtvolle” (“almightiful”) was “allmächtige” (“almighty”), which has the same number of syllables but the wrong accents for this cantata line (“all-MÄCH-ti-ge” versus “ALL-machts-VOL-le”). God the father is many times called “the Almighty” in the book of Revelation. See also fnn. 26 and 27, above.

²⁹“Wende” is a subjunctive form of the verb, but it may have been employed simply for its rhyme with “Hände” and not for its actual mood; i.e., perhaps it should be read as indicative, “wende[t]”—compare this line with the similar expression in lines 6–9 of the first movement, “Gott, der unsern Gang zum rechten Wege wendet” (“God, who will turn our course to the right way”). On the other hand, perhaps “wende” here is meant to have double signification (“may/will turn”).

³⁰See fn. 3, above.