

“Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ” BWV 177

1. Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ,
Ich bitt, erhör mein Klagen,
Verleih mir Gnad zu dieser Frist,
Lass mich doch nicht verzagen;
Den rechten Glauben, Herr,¹ ich mein,
Den wollest du mir geben,
Dir zu leben,
Meinm Nächsten nütz zu sein,
Dein Wort zu halten eben.

2. Ich bitt noch mehr, o Herre Gott,
Du kannst es mir wohl geben:
Dass ich werd nimmermehr zu Spott,⁶
Die Hoffnung gib darneben,
Voraus, wenn ich muss hier davon,
Dass ich dir mög vertrauen
Und nicht bauen
Auf alles mein Tun,
Sonst wird⁷ michs ewig reuen.

3. Verleih, dass ich aus Herzensgrund

1. I call to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
I beseech [you]: Give heed to² my lamenting.
Vouchsafe me grace in this [my allotted life] span;³
Do not let me yet despair.
May you, Lord, I might hope,
Grant me the proper faith:
To live unto you,⁴
To be of benefit to my neighbor,
To keep your word rightly.⁵

2. I beseech [you] furthermore, O Lord God,
[For] what you can well grant me:
That I may nevermore come to be in derision;
In addition, grant [me] hope
For the future, when I must [depart] from [earthly life] here,⁸
That I might trust in you
And not rely [for my salvation]
On all my doings;
Otherwise I will rue it eternally.

3. Vouchsafe that from the bottom of my heart

¹In many contemporary hymnbooks (and in movement 6 of Bach’s church cantata “Barmherziges Herze der ewigen Liebe” BWV 185) this reads not “Den rechten Glauben, Herr” (“[Grant me] the proper faith, Lord”) but “Den rechten Weg, o Herr” (“[Grant me] the proper path [to go upon], o Lord”).

²“Erhören” carries the sense of “to hear” in its special sense of “to listen to with compliance or assent,” often employed in situations of acceding to or granting of a request or prayer.

³“In dieser Frist” here most likely refers to “in this human lifespan,” “my time on earth.” This is the way the word “Frist” is employed in Luther’s rendering of Genesis 6:3, where God declares of human beings (who earlier in the biblical narratives had been granted lifespans that were much longer), “Ich will ihnen noch Frist geben hundertundzwanzig Jahre” (“I will [henceforth] grant them yet [as a] time span [the life expectancy] of one hundred and twenty years [in which to repent of their wickedness]”).

⁴This language comes from Romans 14:8, “Leben wir, so leben wir dem HERRN; sterben wir, so sterben wir dem HERRN” (“If we live, then we live unto the LORD; if we die, then we die unto the LORD”). “To live/die unto the Lord” is a biblical expression whose meaning is “to live/die for the sake of God’s will.”

⁵“Eben” had a wide variety of meanings in older German; in this instance it could be a clipped form of “ebenso” (“as well”), but it seems even more likely to be used here as a synonym for certain subsets of related meanings of “richtig” (“correctly”), such as “gerecht” (“rightly”) and “rechtschaffen” (“righteously”).

⁶In many older hymnbooks this reads not “Dass ich werd nimmermehr zu Spott” (“That I may nevermore come to be in ridicule”) but “Dass ich nicht wieder werd zu Spott” (“That I may not again come to be in ridicule”).

⁷In Bach’s own score and original performing part this reads “wird” (“will”) in m. 50 but “mögt” (“may/might”) in m. 58; in the contemporary hymnbooks this does read “wird.”

⁸The sense of this line is derived from Psalm 39:5, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “HERR, lehre doch mich, dass es ein Ende mit mir haben muss, und mein Leben ein Ziel hat, und ich davon muss” (“LORD, teach me yet that there must be an end [of the line] with me [in this life], and my [earthly] life has a finish, and I must [in the end go/depart] from here”).

**Mein Feinden mög vergeben,
Verzeih mir auch zu dieser Stund,
Gib⁹ mir ein neues Leben;
Dein Wort mein Speis lass allweg sein,
Damit mein Seel zu nähren,
Mich zu wehren,
Wenn Unglück geht daher,
Das mich bald möcht abkehren.**

**I might forgive my enemies.
Absolve me as well at this hour;
Grant me a new life [of eternal blessing].¹⁰
Let your word always be my food,
Thereby to nourish my soul,
[And] to hold me back¹¹
When calamity appears¹²
That might immediately turn me away [from you].**

**4. Lass mich kein Lust noch Furcht von dir
In dieser Welt abtreiben.¹³
Beständigsein ans End gib mir,
Du hast allein in Händen;
Und wem du gibst, der hats umsonst:
Es kann niemand ererben
Noch erwerben¹⁴
Durch Werke deine Gnad,
Die uns errett vom Sterben.**

**4. Let no lust [of the flesh and the eyes]¹⁵ or fear drive me away¹⁶
From you in this world.
To the end [of this life] grant me adherence [to you];
You alone have it [all] in [your] hands.
And whomever you grant it [adherence to you], he has it gratis:
No one can inherit,
Nor purchase
Through [good] works, your grace
That rescues us from dying [unto eternity].**

⁹In many contemporary hymnbooks this reads not “Gib” (“give/grant”) but “Schaf” (“create”).

¹⁰The sense of this line is derived from Romans 6:4, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “So sind wir je mit ihm begraben durch die Taufe in den Tod, auf dass, gleichwie Christus ist auferweckt von den Toten durch die Herrlichkeit des Vaters, also sollen auch wir in einem neuen Leben wandeln” (“Therefore we are each of us buried with him by baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of [God] the father, so shall we too walk in a new life [i.e., in a life on earth that, by ‘prolepsis,’ both anticipates and in a sense already participates in an eternally blessed life in heaven]”); and from John 10:28, where Jesus says, “ich gebe ihnen das ewige Leben” (“I grant them [my followers] eternal life”).

¹¹The verb “wehren” usually means “to defend,” but here it is apparently used in one of its other senses, “to hinder” or “to hold back.” The word is used in this way, e.g., in Psalm 119:101 and Proverbs 1:15 in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day.

¹²“Dahergehen,” literally is “to go forth,” but German sometimes uses “go” where English would use “come”; in this line of the hymn the sense “to come forth” is figurative for “to come into existence,” “to emerge visibly,” “to appear.” The expressions “dahergehen” and “Unglück” are found together in Luther’s idiosyncratic rendering of Jeremiah 1:6, “es geht daher ein Unglück von Mitternacht” (“there appears a calamity from the north”); note that Luther’s “Mitternacht” here is used not in its temporal sense of “twelve o’clock at night” but in its older-German geographical sense as a rendering of the Latin “septentrio” (“the north”).

¹³In m. 15, Bach’s own score and original performing part read “mich ... von dir abwenden” (“avert me from you”), but in mm. 21, 25, and 28, they read “mich ... von dir abtreiben” (“drive me away from you”); the great majority of the contemporary hymnbooks give “abwenden,” but a few do give “abtreiben.” Modern editions give “abwenden”; but in Bach’s own performances “abtreiben” predominated, and so we give that reading here.

¹⁴The hymnbooks read not “Es kann niemand ererben / Noch erwerben / Durch Werke deine Gnad” (“No one can inherit, / Nor purchase, / Through [good] works, your grace”) but “Es mag niemand erwerben, / Noch ererben, / Durch Werke deine Gnad” (literally, “No one may purchase, nor inherit, through [good] works your grace”; i.e., “No one may purchase your grace through [good] works, nor [may one] inherit [your grace]).

¹⁵Lines 1–2 are probably drawing on 1 John 2:16, “alles, was in der Welt ist (nämlich des Fleisches Lust, und der Augen Lust, und hoffärtiges Leben), ist nicht vom Vater, sondern von der Welt” (“everything that is in the world—namely the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and haughty living—is not from [God] the father but from the world”).

¹⁶On the original wording in the Bach sources and the hymnals, see fn. 13, above.

5. Ich lieg im Streit und widerstreb,
Hilf, o Herr Christ, dem Schwachen!
An deiner Gnad allein ich kleb,
Du kannst mich stärker machen.
Kömmt nun Anfechtung, Herr, so wehr,
Dass sie mich nicht umstossen.
Du kannst massen,
Dass mirs nicht bring Gefahr;
Ich weiss, du wirst nicht lassen.

Johann Agricola

5. I am in [internal] strife, and resist [the dictates of my
conscience];¹⁷
Help, O Lord Christ, the one who is weak.
To your grace alone I cling;
You can make me stronger.
If temptation¹⁸ now comes, Lord, then bar [it],
So that it does not overthrow me.
You can mitigate [all things],¹⁹
So that danger might not come to me;²⁰
I know you will not allow this.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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¹⁷The full sense of this line is derived from Romans 7:22-23, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Denn ich habe Lust an Gottes Gesetz nach dem inwendigen Menschen; ich sehe aber ein ander Gesetz in meinen Gliedern, das da widerstrebet dem Gesetz meines Gemüts, und nimmt mich gefangen in der Sünden Gesetz, welches ist in meinen Gliedern” (“For I have delight in God’s law according to the [renewed] inner person; but I see in my [bodily] members another law that does resist the law of my mind [i.e., the dictates of my judgment and conscience] and takes me captive in sin’s law, which is in my members”).

¹⁸“Anfechtung” (“vexation,” “temptation,” “affliction,” and/or “tribulation”) was, and still is, the Lutheran term for a variety of tribulations surrounding doubts and terrors about one’s moral and spiritual stature before God.

¹⁹In older German the verb “massen” was sometimes employed as a synonym for “mässigen”/“lindern” (“to mitigate”).

²⁰The “es” (“it”) in “mirs” (i.e., a contraction of “mir es” [“to me it”]) does not take “Anfechtung” (see fn. 18 above) as grammatical antecedent—such an “it” would require “sie,” not “es.” Given that there are no nouns in this stanza whose gender is neuter, the “es” (“it”) in this line most probably is an example of what linguists call “dummy pronouns” (words functioning grammatically as pronouns, but which do not have antecedents like normal, referential pronouns do), and in this case the line “Dass mirs nicht bring Gefahr” would be conveying, hyperliterally, “So that to me it not might bring danger” (i.e., “So that danger might not be brought to me”), such that the “it” would be just like the one in the expression “Es regnet” (“It is raining”), or like the one in line 6 in movement 4, “Es kann niemand ererben” (hyperliterally, “It can no one inherit”; i.e., connoting not “No one can inherit it” but simply “No one can inherit”).