

Johann Sebastian Bach  
(1685-1750)  
Cantata B.W.V. 78

# “Jesu, der du meine Seele”

“Jesus, by Thy Cross and Passion”



Edition  
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*Dedicated to God and the Music Ministry  
Of Jarvis Memorial United Methodist Church*

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## Bach and His Cantatas

We hear the word “cantata” commonly used these days, especially in churches with choirs, and especially around Christmas and Easter when larger musical presentations are likely. The word cantata comes from the Latin, *cantu or canto*, meaning, “song” or “to sing”, and is simply a generic term for an extended vocal work with multiple movements. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century when the earliest cantatas appeared, few were based on Christian themes.

In those times, the Protestant Reformation was much more in Germany than a movement one reads about in history books. Today, in America, we take for granted being able to read the scriptures in our own tongue and to worship in ways that are meaningful. In 1650’s in Germany, however, the memory was still fresh of the hard-fought battles required to bring Christianity back to the people. It was Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) who saw the incredible potential of the cantata form to teach and to lift up the Gospel message. He envisioned short works in the language of the people for nearly every Sunday of the church year, always built around hymns familiar to his congregation and the assigned scripture. Over the course of his life, Bach wrote 250 cantatas, including three complete 52-week cycles.

The Bach cantatas are the ultimate in “worship music”. They were conceived to be presented in the context of a worship service where the movements were to be interspersed with the reading of scripture and a sermon. Nearly always, the hymn (or “chorale”, as German Lutherans called it), on which the cantata was based, closed the service sung by all in attendance. Congregational participation was critical to Bach. Using melodies and texts that were familiar, having everyone actively involved through singing, designing a musical experience that supported the scripture and sermon – all of these elements were intended to create an atmosphere conducive to worship rather than a mere concert.

Bach’s sensitivity to worship, I think, was wonderfully underlined in a review of the popular movie, Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” from the New York Times in 2004. The review, entitled “Two Very Different Passions” contrasts Gibson’s approach to the passion narrative and that of J. S. Bach in his “Passions” according to St. Matthew and St. John. The reviewer, Charles Varsogea, writes “Only the most jaded viewer could watch [Gibson’s] movie without being powerfully effected by Jesus’ physical misery. Many who have seen the movie have been reduced to tears and, in some cases, even more comprehensive expressions of sympathy and sorrow... Bach doesn’t try to take his audience back in time to *experience* Jesus’ passion... Where Gibson turns our stomach and then turns us away, Bach makes us sing. Where Gibson’s theology wants us to suffer for our sins along side the one who died for them, Bach’s doctrine prompts him to rejoice in what Jesus has accomplished for him. Bach, in turn, invites us to rejoice with him. Gibson will not be satisfied until our hearts are broken with grief. Bach will not be content until our hearts are bursting with joy and thanksgiving...Mel Gibson gives us a Christ who, while suffering for us, invites us to suffer with Him. In Bach’s Passions, Jesus suffers in our place. In Gibson’s film, we are to sympathize with Jesus. Bach presents us with a Savior who sympathizes with us. One makes us weep, and one makes us sing.”

The purpose of including this extract is certainly not to make a value judgment regarding “The Passion of the Christ”. Gibson’s purpose was to create a dramatic, riveting cinematic retelling of the passion narrative, and he accomplished that. Bach’s purpose, in his passions and sacred cantatas, is WORSHIP. For Bach, it is not possible for Christians to simply sit back and have the drama of redemption acted out before them as a recitation of historical events. For God’s gift of redemption to mean anything, we must be actively involved. It’s God working his redemptive power in us, right now, that’s important, and Bach strived each day to create music which allowed for that work to be done.

And what about this amazing worship resource, the cantatas, which Bach left us? Today, they are rarely heard in worship. Concert performances of the most famous ones occasionally surface. Very often these are performed in the original German. And that is no wonder since the stilted English translations of most editions are clumsy and almost

unintelligible. That is all very sad, for Bach would undoubtedly have wanted his cantatas used in worship and presented in a language clearly understood by worshippers.

This edition of Bach's cantata 78, *Jesu der du meine seele*, is an effort to provide a practical edition for protestant worship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The text of the opening chorus and closing chorale is adapted from an anonymous 19<sup>th</sup> century paraphrase of Johan Rist's hymn opening with the words, "Jesus By Thy Cross and Passion". An additional stanza is added from the 15<sup>th</sup> century priest/reformer Girolamo Savonarola's translation of Rist's text.

## Cantata No. 78

Johann Sebastian Bach wrote his Cantata No. 78, "Jesu der du meine seele" in September of 1724 to be used on the "14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity". Trinity Sunday is the Sunday immediately after Pentecost Sunday, and so this would be the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost in Methodist parlance. He based it on a hymn well known to his people. The text and tune were by Johann Rist (1607-1667), a celebrated poet of the previous century.



Johann Rist, 1607-1667

Johann Rist was the son of a Lutheran pastor and grew up in Hamburg. He was studying at the University of Rostock while the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) was raging and the Plague was killing thousands across Europe. He himself was infected with the disease and bedridden, but survived. While trained in medicine, it was Rist's poetry that gained him attention. In 1644, Emperor Ferdinand II designated Rist Poet Laureate of Germany, and he was awarded many other honors over the course of his life.

The devotional hymn, *Jesu der du meine seele*, was penned by Rist in 1641. Following are verses used by Bach in Rist's original German and a literal, non-metrical translation by Francis Brown (2005) which is used by permission from [www.bach-cantatas.com](http://www.bach-cantatas.com).

**Jesu, der du meine Seele  
Hast durch deinen bitteren Tod  
Aus des Teufels finstern Höhle  
Und der schweren Seelennot  
Kräftiglich herausgerissen  
Und mich solches lassen wissen  
Durch dein angenehmes Wort,  
Sei doch itzt, o Gott, mein Hort!**

**Ach ich bin ein Kind der Sünden,  
ach ich irre weit und breit !**

**Dies mein Herz mit Leid vermengen,  
das dein theures Blut besprenget,  
so am Kreuz vergossen ist,**

*Jesus, it is by you that my soul  
through your bitter death  
from the devil's dark hell  
and the heavy pain of sin  
has been mightily snatched away,  
and you have made this known to me  
through your delightful word:  
be now, oh God, my stronghold.*

*Ah, I am a child of sin,  
ah I wander far and wide.*

*This, my heart, with grief o'ertaken,  
by Thy precious blood forsaken  
on the cross poured out for me,*

**geb ich dir, Herr Jesu Christ !**

*Give I now, Jesus, to Thee!*

**Nun, ich weiß, du wirst mir stillen  
Mein Gewissen, das mich plagt.  
Es wird deine Treu erfüllen,  
Was du selber hast gesagt:  
Dass auf dieser weiten Erden  
Keiner soll verloren werden,  
Sondern ewig leben soll,  
Wenn er nur ist Glaubens voll.**

*Now I know you will quieten  
my conscience, that torments me  
Your faithfulness will fulfill  
what you have said yourself:  
that on this wide earth  
no one should be lost  
but should live for ever,  
if only he is full of faith.*

**Herr, ich glaube, hilf mir Schwachen,  
Laß mich ja verzagen nicht;  
Du, du kannst mich stärker machen,  
Wenn mich Sünd und Tod anficht.  
Deiner Güte will ich trauen,  
Bis ich fröhlich werde schauen  
Dich, Herr Jesu, nach dem Streit  
In der süßen Ewigkeit.**

*Lord, I believe, help my weakness!  
Let me not and one despair  
you, you can make you stronger,  
when sin and death trouble me.  
I want to trust your goodness  
until I shall joyfully behold  
you, Lord Jesus, after the battle  
in the happiness of eternity.*

Bach employed Rist's hymn for the opening chorus, the closing chorale, and part of the bass recitative. In addition he employed an unknown librettist, probably from his church, to supply complimentary texts loosely paraphrasing Rist's hymn for the middle movements.

The translation/paraphrase of Jesu der du meine seele used for our Jarvis presentation of the cantata makes no attempt at a literal translation. The first stanza is adapted from an anonymous English translation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Breikopf score as is the text for the second movement duet. Tenor and Bass recitatives and arias are freely translated in modern English by this editor. Finally, in the closing chorale, choir and congregation are asked to sing three stanzas of Rist's chorale. This, in itself, is a change. Bach only notates one stanza. Stanza 2 of the chorale is a translation from the 15<sup>th</sup> century reformer, G. Savonarola, and Stanza 3 is my own free translation.

Chorus: Jesus, by Thy Cross and passion, by the bitter pain Thou bore;  
Save me when temptation threatens death in hell to suffer sore.  
Mightily away Thou bore me with a haven safe before me;  
Through Thy Word, contentment sweet; Thou art still my sure retreat.

Duet: We hasten with eager, yet faltering footsteps, O Jesu, O Master, unto Thee.  
Thou faithfully seekest the ill and the erring.  
Ah! Hear us, we pray! Our voices exalt Thee! O help us, we pray Thee.  
Now grant us Thy grace and Thy merciful favor, we pray, O God.

Recitative: Ah! I am a child of sin. I wander far and near. This sinful burden, on my spirit weighing, will never leave me while this life shall last. My sinful inclinations rule me. My soul cries out, "Ah! Who is there to save me?" But to conquer flesh and blood and to attain a life of virtue is far beyond my feeble strength. Though I admit my every failing, I cannot count the sum of my offenses.

And so I take my deep distress and pain; I take my many burdens, the burdens that torment my soul, and bring them to you, Jesus...sighing. By your grace, forgive my sins, and shield me from God's wrath to suffer.

Aria: Your blood, which has my guilt redeemed, lightens my burden, gladdens my heart, and frees my spirit to love. And should the prince of darkness call me to battle, Lord Jesus stands at my side. So will I rise up in triumph and win the fight!

Recitative: The wounding, nail scars, crown of thorns, the scourge marks that our Lord and Savior bore, for Him are now the mark of triumph, and become for us the token of salvation. When on that dreaded Judgment Day, when all will stand before the Lord, Christ turns it into blessing. No grief, nor pain, nor torment shall move me. All this my Savior knows, and since His heart with love for me doth glow, so, Master, I adore Thee and lay my all before Thee.

For this, my heart with grief acquainted, you gave your precious blood untainted,  
On the Cross, poured out for me. So now I give my love, Lord, to Thee.

Aria: O Lord, wilt Thou appease my conscience which grievously has troubled me?  
I look to Your promised devotion, Your Word my source of hope and peace.  
When we Christians in our lives are faithful, no foe in all eternity from God's embrace shall wrest us.

Chorale: Jesus, by Thy Cross and passion, by the bitter pain Thou bore;  
Save me when temptation threatens death in hell to suffer sore.  
Mightily away Thou bore me with a haven safe before me;  
Through Thy Word, contentment sweet; Thou art still my sure retreat.

[G. Savonarola, 1452-1498]

Do we pass that cross unheeding, breathing no repentant vow,  
Though we see Thee wounded, bleeding, see your thorn-encircled brow?  
Yet Thy wondrous grace hath taught us what Thy sinless death hath bought us:  
Life eternal, peace and rest on the gentle Savior's breast.

[trans. McDaniel, 1990]

Lord, I trust Thee. I adore Thee. Help my weakness, my despair.  
Thou can strengthen and restore me when misdeeds my faith impair.  
On Thy loving grace relying, God Almighty glorifying,  
By Thy side I hope to be ever through eternity.

Bach's Cantata No. 78 is one of his more well-known. Albert Schweitzer referred to it as "One of the most expressive cantatas ever written by Bach." He also described it as "a contrast of Christ's suffering and pain as opposed to that of the joy of salvation. The motif of grief as opposed to the motif of joy. The mighty tearing of the soul from the gloomy..."

It is useful to know that the traditional scripture for the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity in Bach's time as a Lutheran was Luke 17:11-19, the story of the ten lepers. This tradition was retained somewhat in the Common Lectionary we use today where it appears also in the fall season in cycles A & C. Bach scholar, Abbaye d'Ambronay writes that, "Bach and his anonymous librettist treat the leper theme as an allegory for humankind in general." We have all been defiled. "So," he continues, "a spiritual journey is planned for the individual sinner, sick of heart, a path is sign-posted and the painful process of healing can begin."

Bach builds the impressive first movement chorus on repeating downward theme, passed around between altos, tenors, and basses, which provides a stirring counter to the soaring chorale tune sung by the sopranos. Movement 2 has become one of Bach's most famous and delightful duets. It is a rousing scamper for two sopranos depicting the wayward soul as it strives for truth and righteousness in spite of the human condition. Movement 3 and 4

v.

are a recitative and aria for tenor. "Recitative" is a style of composition intended to be "sung speech", the equivalent of dialog in drama. The tenor here takes the role of sinful humanity, crying out for release from the guilt and bondage of sin. In the thrilling aria which follows, the answer to the human dilemma becomes clear: only with Christ at our side, may we experience the final victory. Movements 5 & 6, a recitative and aria for bass, refers directly to the crucified Christ. It is through Christ's passion and ultimate death on the cross that we receive eternal life. Finally, in the closing chorale, choir, orchestra, and congregation join in Rist's great hymn – summing up the message of God's eternal grace.