

"Christ lag in Todes Banden" BWV 4

1. [Sinfonia]

**2. Christ lag in Todes Banden<sup>1</sup>  
Für unsre Sünd gegeben,  
Er ist wieder erstanden  
Und hat uns bracht das Leben.  
Des wir sollen fröhlich sein,  
Gott loben und ihm dankbar sein  
Und singen alleluja,  
Alleluja!**

**3. Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt  
Bei allen Menschenkindern;  
Das macht' alles unsre Sünd,  
Kein Unschuld war zu finden.  
Davon kam der Tod so bald  
Und nahm über uns Gewalt,  
Hielt uns in seinem Reich gefangen.  
Alleluja!**

**4. Jesus Christus, Gottes Sohn,  
An unsre Statt ist kommen  
Und hat die Sünde weggetan,  
Damit dem Tod genommen  
All sein Recht und sein Gewalt;  
Da bleibet nichts denn Tods Gestalt,  
Den Stachel<sup>3</sup> hat er verloren.**

1. [Sinfonia]

**2. Christ lay in death's bonds,  
Given for our sin;  
He is risen again  
And has brought us [eternal] life.<sup>2</sup>  
Of this we should be joyful,  
Praise God and be thankful to him  
And sing hallelujah.  
Hallelujah.**

**3. Nobody could restrain death,  
Among all the children of humankind;  
Our sin made all that so;  
No innocence was to be found.  
As a result, death came immediately  
And seized power over us,  
Held us imprisoned in its realm.  
Hallelujah.**

**4. Jesus Christ, God's son,  
Has come in our stead<sup>4</sup>  
And did away with our sin,  
Thereby taking from death  
All its privilege and its power.  
There remains nothing but death's shape;  
[Death] has lost its sting.<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>In some editions of BWV 4, this is given as one word, "Todesbanden," but Bach's original materials read "Todes Banden," perhaps referring not simply to being almost dead, but also to being ensnared by death as a personification of evil (as, e.g., in Jeremiah 9:20-21). The expression "Todes Bande" comes from Psalm 18:5, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day read "Es umfingen mich des Todes Bande, und die Bäche Belial erschreckten mich" ("Death's bonds beset me, and the [torrential] brooks of Belial [Satan] terrified me"). Luther and his followers took Psalm 18 to be speaking of the crucifixion of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup>In the perspective of the hymn, this refers to "life" as it was biblically meant to be. Death is regarded not just as something that happens naturally; it is humanity's punishment for sin. "Life" (in the New Testament's Greek, "zoe") in this sense comes from God and therefore cannot decay or be destroyed—the "zoe" that is "brought by Christ" is eternal life. 2 Timothy 1:10, some of whose language is used in Versus 1 and 3 of the hymn, speaks of the immortality brought by Christ; in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day this biblical passage reads "Jesu Christi, der dem Tode die Macht hat genommen und das Leben und ein unvergänglich Wesen ans Licht gebracht durch das Evangelium" ("[the appearing] of Jesus Christ, who has taken from death its power, and has brought life and an imperishable existence to light through the gospel").

<sup>3</sup>Bach's musical setting provides only one note for this word, but the original performing part clearly gives "Stachel" with two syllables.

<sup>4</sup>"An unsre Statt" here means not "to our abode/place," but "in our stead/place." This line of the hymn assumes that Jesus came out of eternity into the world as a human being to die on the cross in an atoning sacrifice to God for the sin of humanity; that is, Jesus was punished "in our stead," as a sort of scapegoat. See also lines 1–2 of Versus 1, above.

<sup>5</sup>That is, death has lost its metaphorical poison-stinger and thus the ability to stab people with sin. This notion is derived from 1 Corinthians 15:54-56, "Der Tod ist verschlungen in den Sieg. Tod, wo ist dein Stachel? ... der Stachel des Todes ist die Sünde" ("Death is swallowed up into victory. Death, where [now] is your sting? ... Death's sting is sin").

**Alleluja!**

**5. Es war ein wunderlicher Krieg,  
Da Tod und Leben rungen;  
Das Leben (da)<sup>6</sup> behielt den Sieg,  
Es hat den Tod verschlungen.  
Die Schrift hat verkündig(e)t<sup>7</sup> das,  
Wie ein Tod den andern frass,  
Ein Spott aus dem Tod ist worden.  
Alleluja!**

**6. Hier ist das rechte Osterlamm,  
Davon Gott hat geboten,  
Das ist hoch an des Kreuzes Stamm  
In heisser Lieb gebraten,  
Das Blut zeichnet unser Tür,**

**Hallelujah.**

**5. It was a wondrous battle [on the cross],  
Where death [Satan] and life [Jesus] wrestled;<sup>8</sup>  
Life got the victory (there);<sup>9</sup>  
It has swallowed up death.<sup>10</sup>  
Scripture has proclaimed this:  
How one death [Jesus's] devoured the other [death]<sup>11</sup>  
[And] a mockery was made of death.  
Hallelujah.**

**6. Here is the proper paschal/Easter<sup>12</sup> lamb—  
God has commanded<sup>13</sup> of it—  
Which is, up on the cross's trunk,  
Roasted in ardent love.  
The blood [of the lamb, Jesus] marks our door,<sup>14</sup>**

<sup>6</sup>In Bach's surviving materials, the soprano, tenor, and bass parts provide the additional word "da."

<sup>7</sup>In Bach's surviving materials, the alto line reads "verkündiget"; the soprano, tenor, and bass lines read "verkündiget."

<sup>8</sup>The notion that the crucifixion of Jesus was a battle site where Jesus/life cosmically "wrestled" with death/Satan is derived from the idiosyncratic translation of Luke 22:44 in the Luther Bible. Regarding Jesus, the original Greek says simply: "And being in agony, ..." ("kai genomenos er agonia"); but Luther rendered these four words as "And it came [to pass] that he [Jesus] wrestled with death [Satan]" ("Und es kam, dass er mit dem Tode rang"). The same verb—"ringen" ("to wrestle")—was used by Luther in his rendering of Genesis 32:22-31, the enigmatic foundational story of Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, wrestling through an entire night with a certain "man" at the Jabbok river. In the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, Genesis 32:24 reads "Da rang ein Mann mit ihm" ("There [at Peniel, a river bank on the Jabbok] a [possibly divine figure in the form of a] man wrestled with him"). According to Luther's radically christocentric reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, the figure whom Jacob wrestled with was actually Christ himself.

<sup>9</sup>On this "victory" over death, see n. 5, above.

<sup>10</sup>On death being "swallowed up," see n. 5, above.

<sup>11</sup>"Scripture has proclaimed" the destruction of the power of death in Isaiah 25:8, reading "[GOTT] wird den Tod verschlingen ewiglich" ("[God] will swallow up death eternally"); see also n. 5, above.

<sup>12</sup>Literally, "Osterlamm" would be just "Easter lamb." Luther and Lutheranism equivocated to an extent, though, on whether the word "Oster" referred to the (Christian) festival of "Easter" or to the (Jewish) festival of "Passover," with the latter also understood as prefiguring the former. Luther used both "Oster" and "Passah" for "Passover" in his translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, but he used only "Oster" in his New Testament. It may have been for its lack of Jewish associations that Luther chose the non-biblical word "Oster," derived from the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, "Eostre" or "Ostara."

<sup>13</sup>"Geboten" here means not "offered," but "commanded." The idea is that God "had commanded" the new (Easter) sacrifice of Jesus in place of the old (paschal) sacrifice of the lamb, in the sense that the death of Jesus on the cross, as "lamb of God" (John 1:29, Revelation 5:8-9), was biblically narrated as having been God's will (Mark 14:36 and John 12:28). Luther drew a parallel with Exodus 12:1-28, in which God "had commanded" ("geboten hatte," in verse 28) the ancient Israelites to prepare for their exodus from enslavement in Egypt by holding a banquet while a final plague was being visited upon Egypt by God, and then to memorialize the event annually by eating unleavened bread for a week and by reenacting the banquet. They had been told, further, to mark their doors with the blood of the unblemished lambs eaten at the banquet, because "the Destroyer" (12:23), as God's agent, would kill the firstborn of any household in the land of Egypt that was not so marked; thus the firstborn of the Egyptians were destroyed, whereas the Israelite households were protected and "passed over."

<sup>14</sup>See n. 13, above. In traditional Christianity, the Passover narrative (Exodus 12), including its marking of the doors with blood, is believed to foreshadow the crucifixion of Jesus. The paschal lamb, Jesus, sheds blood as he is

**Das hält der Glaub dem Tode für,  
Der Würger kann uns nicht mehr schaden.  
Alleluja!**

**[Blood] with which faith rebukes<sup>15</sup> death;  
The Destroyer Angel<sup>16</sup> can no longer harm us.  
Hallelujah.**

**7. So feiern wir das hohe Fest  
Mit Herzensfreud und Wonne,  
Das uns der Herr scheinen lässt,  
Er ist selber die Sonne,  
Der durch seiner Gnaden Glanz  
Erleuchtet unsre Herzen ganz,  
Der Sünden Nacht ist verschwunden.  
Alleluja!**

**7. Thus we celebrate the high feast [Easter]  
With joy of heart and gladness,<sup>17</sup>  
[The feast] that the Lord lets shine upon us;  
He himself is the sun,  
Who through his luster of grace  
Illumines our hearts entirely;  
The night of sin has vanished.  
Hallelujah.**

**8. Wir essen und leben wohl  
In rechten Osterfladen,  
Der alte Sauerteig nicht soll  
Sein bei dem Wort der Gnaden,  
Christus will die Koste sein  
Und speisen die Seel allein,  
Der Glaub will keins andern leben.  
Alleluja!**

**8. We eat and live well  
In [Christ, the] proper paschal/Easter flatbread;<sup>18</sup>  
The old sourdough<sup>19</sup> shall not  
Be with the word of grace.  
Christ will be the nourishment  
And alone feed the soul;  
Faith will live by none other [than Christ].<sup>20</sup>  
Hallelujah.**

Martin Luther

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)

metaphorically roasted on the cross, and his literal physical body and blood, according to Lutheran belief, is then consumed “in, with, and among/under” the consecrated elements in the sacrament of Communion. Those who follow the lamb/Jesus are no longer enslaved to Egypt/sin, because the life-saving blood of the lamb/Jesus occasions God to pass over their “door,” such that in their cases the Destroyer/death/Satan does not carry out its destruction.

<sup>15</sup>“Fürhalten,” an older spelling of “vorhalten,” could mean “to force back” or “to upbraid.” The English word “rebuke” is derived from the Anglo-Norman and Old French “rebuker” (“to force back”).

<sup>16</sup>“Der Würger,” though literally perhaps “the strangler,” in this hymn verse is “the Destroyer” (Hebrew, “hammašhîṭ”) depicted in Exodus 12:23 (see also n. 13, above), a mysterious figure traditionally held to be an angel of death. Although Luther translated “hammašhîṭ” as “de[r] Verderber” (“the Ruiner”) in Exodus 12:23, he and others typically used “Würg-Engel” (“Destroyer/Killer/Strangler-Angel”) as the designation for this figure in their biblical commentaries and sermons.

<sup>17</sup>The expression “joy of heart and gladness” was associated specifically with the worship of God; it comes from Luther’s idiosyncratic rendering of Psalm 63:5, “Das wäre meines Herzens Freude und Wonne, wenn ich dich mit fröhlichem Munde loben sollte” (“That would be joy of heart, and gladness, of mine, when I would have a duty to praise you with happy mouth”); the original Hebrew text reads, “My self shall be sated as with [a rich feast of] suet and fat; and my mouth shall praise [God] with exulting lips.”

<sup>18</sup>Regarding “paschal/Easter,” see n. 12, above. The “proper” paschal/Easter flatbread here is held to be the consecrated bread of the Christian sacrament of Communion. According to Lutheran teaching, it is the physical body of Christ that one eats in Communion (see n. 14, above). This reading helps to explain the use of the preposition “in” at line 2 of Versus 7—one is to live “in Christ,” according to the New Testament.

<sup>19</sup>The expression “old sourdough” comes from 1 Corinthians 5:8, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Darum lasset uns Ostern halten, nicht im alten Sauerteig, auch nicht im Sauerteig der Bosheit und Schalkheit, sondern in dem Süsteig der Lauterkeit und Wahrheit” (“Therefore let us [followers of Jesus] keep [the festival of] Easter, not in the old sourdough, and not in the sourdough of evil and knavery, but in the sweet-dough of sincerity and truth”). All leaven is commanded in Exodus 12:15 to be entirely removed from the home in preparation for Passover, and “sweet-dough” (unleavened dough) is commanded in Exodus 13:7 to be employed to make the paschal bread. “Old leaven” was an ancient metaphor for evil; Luther associated “old leaven” generally with sin and unbelief, and sometimes particularly with Jews or with the heathen state of gentiles before they become “new” as Christians.

<sup>20</sup>In John 6:35 and 6:48, Jesus says “Ich bin das Brot des Lebens” (“I [alone] am the bread of [eternal] life”).



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