

“Was frag ich nach der Welt” BWV 94

**1. Was frag ich nach der Welt
Und allen ihren Schätzen
Wenn ich mich nur an dir,
Mein Jesu, kann ergötzen!
Dich hab ich einzig mir
Zur Wollust fürgestellt,
Du,¹ du bist meine Ruh:
Was frag ich nach der Welt!**

**2. Die Welt ist wie ein Rauch und Schatten
Der bald verschwindet und vergeht,
Weil sie nur kurze Zeit besteht.
Wenn aber alles fällt und bricht,
Bleibt Jesus meine Zuversicht,
An dem sich meine Seele hält.
Darum: was frag ich nach der Welt!**

**3. Die Welt sucht Ehr und Ruhm
Bei hoherhabnen Leuten.
Ein Stolzer baut die prächtigsten Paläste,
Er sucht das höchste Ehrenamt,
Er kleidet sich aufs beste
In Purpur, Gold, in Silber, Seid und Samt.
Sein Name soll für allen⁴
In jedem Teil der Welt erschallen.
Sein Hochmuts-Turm**

**1. Why would I ask [anything] of the world
And all its treasures
When I can find enjoyment,
My Jesus, only in you?
You alone have I
Set before me for delectation.²
You, you are my repose;
Why would I ask [anything] of the world?**

**2. The world is like a [wisp of] smoke and shadow
That quickly vanishes and fades away,
Because it [the world] abides only a short time.
But when everything falls and breaks [apart],
Jesus remains my hope [and refuge],³
To whom my soul holds itself fast.
Thus: Why would I ask [anything] of the world?**

**3. The world seeks honor and renown
Among highly exalted people.
A proud man builds the most splendid palaces;
He seeks the highest post of honor;
He [like Babylon/Babel]⁵ clothes himself in the finest—
In [royal] purple, gold, in silver, silk, and velvet.
His name shall sound forth before all [people]⁶
In every part of the world.
His tower of hubris**

GENERAL NOTE: Movements 1 and 8 take their texts verbatim from the outer stanzas of the hymn “Was frag ich nach der Welt.” The internal movements either paraphrase other stanzas or quote them literally with the addition of interspersed newly written poetry.

¹Some modern editions of the cantata here read “Denn du” (“For you”).

²In eighteenth-century and later German, the word “Wollust” was generally employed to refer to pleasure/indulgence in a negative sense (as a vice, for example, in the libretto from Bach’s Cantata 213); but in older German (as in this hymn stanza), “Wollust” could refer to delectation, with positive connotations.

³The motto “Gott ist unser Zuversicht” (“God [including Jesus, in traditional Christian reading,] is our hope/refuge”) appears in Psalm 46:2 and Psalm 62:9. Both the Hebrew source word “machaseh” and Luther’s rendering of it, “Zuversicht,” can mean “hope,” “trust,” “[source of] confidence,” and/or “refuge.”

⁴In modern printings of the libretto this is sometimes mistranscribed, in the singular, as “vor allem” (“above all [else]”).

⁵The book of Revelation depicts the annihilation of a great but wicked city named “Babylon.” Revelation 12:14-18 speaks of Babylon’s “soul” lusting after “purple [clothing], gold, silver, and silk,” among other things. With regard to Babylon/Babel, see also fn. 11, below.

⁶With regard to “für allen” (“before all [people]”) versus “vor allem” (“above all [else]”), see fn. 4, above.

Soll durch die Luft bis an die Wolken dringen
Er trachtet nur nach hohen Dingen
**Und denkt nicht einmal dran,
Wie bald doch diese gleiten.**

Oft bläset eine schale Luft⁷
Den stolzen Leib auf einmal in die Gruft,
Und da verschwindet alle Pracht,
Wormit der arme Erdenwurm
Hier in der Welt so grossen Staat gemacht.
Ach!⁸ solcher eitler Tand
Wird weit von mir aus meiner Brust verbannt.

**Dies⁹ aber, was mein Herz
Vor anderm rühmlich hält,
Was Christen wahren Ruhm und rechte¹⁰ Ehre gibet,
Und was mein Geist,
Der sich der Eitelkeit entreisst,
Anstatt der Pracht und Hoffart liebet,
Ist Jesus nur allein,
Und dieser solls auch ewig sein.
Gesetzt, dass mich die Welt
Darum vor töricht hält:
Was frag ich nach der Welt!**

4. Betörte Welt, betörte Welt!
Auch dein Reichtum, Gut und Geld
Ist Betrug und falscher Schein.
Du magst den eitlen Mammon zählen,

Shall press [like the Tower of Babel]¹¹ through the air to the clouds;
He seeks only after lofty things¹²

**And does not once think about
How soon these [lofty things] yet slip [into error].¹³**

Often an ill wind¹⁴ suddenly blows
The proud body into the crypt,
And [right] then all the splendor vanishes
Upon which the wretched earthworm [the proud man]
Had laid so great a stress here in the world.
Ah! such vain trumpery
Is banished out of my breast, far from me.

**But this, what my heart
Holds to be praiseworthy before anything else—**

What gives Christians true renown and proper honor,
And what my spirit,
Which wrests itself from vanity,
Loves instead of splendor and arrogance—

Is only Jesus alone,
And this [man—Jesus] it shall be [for me] also eternally.
Granted that the world
Thus holds me to be daft:

Why would I ask [anything] of the world?

4. Befooled world, befooled world!
Even your wealth, property, and money
Is deception and false pretense.
You may tally up vain mammon,

⁷This is the reading of the original performing part. Bach's own score reads "Oft bläst uns eine schale Luft" ("Often [on] us an ill wind blows").

⁸This is sometimes given in modern printings as "Acht" ("Take heed"), but Bach's own materials clearly read "Ach" ("Ah").

⁹Contemporary hymnbooks and some modern editions of this cantata here read "Das" ("That").

¹⁰Bach's own score and most modern editions here read "wahre" ("true"). The original performing part reads "rechte" ("proper").

¹¹This "tower of hubris" is an allusion to the narrative of Genesis 11:1-9, in which a united human race that all speaks but one language journeys to Shinar, where they decide to make a name for themselves by building a great city, called "Babel" (i.e., Babylon), with a tower that would reach to the heavens. God reacts by diversifying their speech into various languages and scattering the population over the face of the earth. According to traditional biblical interpretation, this was God's punishment for humanity's hubris. With regard to Babylon, see also fn. 5, above.

¹²"Trachten nach" had a variety of meanings on older German. Here it is clearly being used in its sense of "to seek after," as this line is quoting from Luther's rendering of Romans 12:16, "Habt einerlei Sinn untereinander; trachtet nicht nach hohen Dingen, sondern haltet euch herunter zu den Niedrigen" ("Have one and the same mind among one another; do not seek after lofty things, rather keep yourselves down to the lowly").

¹³"Gleiten" ("to slip") is the verb the Luther Bibles frequently employ in connection with a "Fehltritt" (literally, a "false step"; metaphorically, an "error").

¹⁴Literally, "a stale air."

Ich will davor mir Jesum wählen;
Jesus, Jesus soll allein
Meiner Seele Reichthum sein.
Betörte Welt, betörte Welt!

5. Die Welt bekümmert sich.

Was muss doch wohl der Kummer sein?
O Torheit! dieses macht ihr Pein:
Im Fall sie wird verachtet.
Welt, schäme dich!
Gott hat dich ja so sehr geliebet,
Dass er sein eingebornes Kind
Vor deine Sünd
Zur grössten Schmach um dein Ehre gibet,
Und du willst nicht um Jesu willen leiden?
Die Traurigkeit der Welt ist niemals grösser,
**Als wenn man ihr mit List
Nach ihren Ehren trachtet.**
Es ist ja besser,
**Ich trage Christi Schmach,
Solang es ihm gefällt.**
Es ist ja nur ein Leiden dieser Zeit,
Ich weiss gewiss, dass mich die Ewigkeit
Dafür mit Preis und Ehren krönet;
Ob mich die Welt
Verspottet und verhöhnet,
Ob sie mich gleich verächtlich hält,
**Wenn mich mein Jesus ehrt:
Was frag ich nach der Welt!**

6. Die Welt kann ihre Lust und Freud,
Das Blendwerk schnöder Eitelkeit,

I wish to choose Jesus instead for me;
Jesus, Jesus shall alone
Be my soul's wealth.
Befooled world, befooled world!

5. The world aggrieves itself.

What ever must the grief yet be?
Oh foolishness! this [is what] causes it [the world] pain:
[It is aggrieved] in the case it is despised.
World, be ashamed!
God has indeed loved you so much
That he gives [over] his only-begotten¹⁵ child¹⁶—
For your sin—
To the greatest humiliation [on the cross], for your honor,
And you are not willing to suffer for Jesus's sake?
The sorrow of the world is never greater
**Than¹⁷ when one seeks after¹⁸ it [the world]
[And] its honors with cunning.**
Indeed it is better
**[That] I [should] bear Christ's humiliation
[For] as long as it pleases him.**
It is only a single suffering [among the sufferings] of this present time;¹⁹
I know for certain that eternity
Crowns me for it with praise and honor.
If the world
Mocks and scorns me,
If it holds me even to be contemptible
**When my Jesus honors me,
Why would I ask [anything] of the world?**

6. The world cannot exalt its delight and pleasure,
The chicanery of odious vanity,

¹⁵The word “eingeborne” can be somewhat ambiguous, in the same ways that the various biblical terms underlying it are ambiguous: they all can mean “only-born” (that is, by the woman who gives birth) or “only-begotten” (of the human couple, or of the woman, or of the human male). Thus, English translators have traditionally rendered the biblical terms behind Luther's various grammatical forms of “gebären” as “to beget” when a male progenitor is the subject, and as “to bear” or “to give birth to” when a female progenitor is the subject. As *God's* “only-begotten,” Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is singular in his manner of existence: in traditional Christian doctrine, he is proclaimed as eternally “begotten” of God the father, not temporally made or created.

¹⁶Normally, religious poetry would speak of Jesus not as God's “eingebornes Kind” (“only-begotten child”) but “eingeborner Sohn” (“only-begotten son”); see also fn. 15, above. The former is employed here to effect a (slightly inexact) rhyme with the word “Sünd” (“sin”).

¹⁷By dint of the interspersed poetry here, the sense of the hymn's word “als” changes from “as” to “than”: The hymn on its own would read (i.e., also with its different punctuation), “Die Welt bekümmert sich, im Fall sie wird verachtet, als wenn man ihr mit List nach ihren Ehren trachtet” (“The world aggrieves itself in the case it is despised, as [for example] when one seeks after it [and] its honors with cunning”).

¹⁸With regard to “trachten nach” having the sense of “to seek after,” see fn. 12, above.

¹⁹“The sufferings of this present time” (Luther Bibles, “dieser Zeit Leiden”) is a biblical phrase, famously employed in Romans 8:18.

Nicht hoch genug erhöhen.
Sie wühlt, nur gelben Kot zu finden,
Gleich einem Maulwurf in den Gründen
Und lässt dafür den Himmel stehen.

7. Es²³ halt es mit der blinden Welt,
Wer nichts auf seine Seele hält,
Mir ekelt vor der Erden.
Ich will nur meinen Jesum lieben
Und mich in Buss und Glauben üben,
So kann ich reich und selig werden.

8. Was frag ich nach der Welt!
Im Hui muss sie verschwinden,
Ihr Ansehn kann durchaus
Den blassen Tod nicht binden.
Die Güter müssen fort,
Und alle Lust verfällt;
Bleibt Jesus nur bei mir:
Was frag ich nach der Welt!

Was frag ich nach der Welt!
Mein Jesus ist mein Leben,
Mein Schatz, mein Eigentum,
Dem ich mich ganz ergeben,
Mein ganzes Himmelreich,
Und was mir sonst gefällt.
Drum sag ich noch einmal:
Was frag ich nach der Welt!

Highly enough.
It [the world] grubs in the valleys,²⁰ like a [blind]²¹ mole,
To find only yellow dung [as its “gold”]²²
And, for this, relinquishes heaven.

7. Whoever holds nothing for [the minding of] his soul,
Let him stick with the blind world;
I am nauseated by the earth.
I wish only to love my Jesus
And exercise myself in penitence and faith;
In this way can I become [spiritually] rich and blessed.

8. Why would I ask [anything] of the world?
In an instant it must vanish;
Its esteem can never
Bind pallid death.
[Earthly] goods must perish,²⁴
And all delight decays;
If Jesus just remains with me:
Why would I ask [anything] of the world?

Why would I ask [anything] of the world?
My Jesus is my life,
My treasure, my possession
To whom I have given myself up entirely,
My whole kingdom of heaven,
And that which assuredly²⁵ pleases me.
Thus I say once again:
Why would I ask [anything] of the world?

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)

²⁰In older German (including frequently in the Luther Bibles), the “Grund” in the phrase “in den Gründen” referred not only generally to “the ground/earth” but also specifically to “the valley [floor]” as opposed to the hill.

²¹Moles are not in fact blind, but on account of their small eyes they were sometimes used as a symbol of moral blindness. “The world” is again described as “blind” in line 1 of movement 7, below.

²²“Der gelbe Kot” (“yellow dung/mud/clay”) was the German equivalent of the older-English expression “yellow dirt,” employed to refer disparagingly or censoriously to wealth (i.e., alluding to the word “gold,” in its extended use to mean “money” or “wealth”). In his hymn “Worvon will ich jetzund singen” (sung to the tune of “Freu dich sehr, O meine Seele”), Johann Christoph Arnschwanger, a seventeenth-century German Lutheran pastor and poet, wrote the lines “Was soll Gold, der gelbe Kot, / Gegen dem, was rinnt von Gott?” (“What good is gold, the yellow dung, / Against that which flows from God?”). Medically, yellow stool may indicate a malabsorption disorder caused by a parasite, illness, or disease.

²³This is sometimes given in modern printings not as “es” (“it”) but “er” (“he”).

²⁴The separable verb “fortmüssen” is the equivalent of the Latin “cogi abire” (“to be forced to leave”) and can simply mean “to need/have to leave.” It is also sometimes employed as a euphemism for “sterben” (“to die/perish”).

²⁵“Sonst” was employed in a variety of ways in older German, including as a synonym for “ja freilich” (“yes assuredly”).



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