

# Psalm 61 – Bach Cantata 80

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[ 0 : 00 ] St. John's Shaughnessy Church 300 years ago, Johann Sebastian Bach was 17 years old, about to graduate from school.

He was an accomplished violinist, an accomplished violist, an accomplished clavichordist, an accomplished organist, and a promising composer, just like all our children.

And he was about to begin a career that was marked both by a huge creative output, as well as an almost constant interference and hostility by his superiors.

You know, his final appointment before he died, some 20-30 years before he died, to St. Thomas in Leipzig, he took a 75% pay cut, and to add insult to injury, before he got the job he had to take a theological as well as a musical exam, and to rub salt into the wound, he was actually their third choice as cantor.

And one of the town councillors on the committee commented unhappily, well, if we can't have the best, we might make do with what there is. And incidentally, Bach wrote most of his cantatas within a short period of time, when he first moved to Leipzig, and then gave up.

[ 1 : 52 ] And the experts seemed to think it was the constant interference of his superiors. And we say thank you to them. No, we don't. That was...

You may not know that Bach's compositions received a very mixed reception during his life. Before his death, his works were considered old-fashioned, out of touch by his contemporaries.

And for the next century, he was almost completely forgotten, until in 1829, Felix Mendelssohn rediscovered Bach's score to St. Matthew's Passion.

And you know, it was performed, and the audience was stunned. And since then, there has been a huge revival of Bach. And the revival is quite incredible. I mean, Bach was born, lived and died a faithful Lutheran, and yet he is claimed by almost every religious body in the world.

The Quakers claim Bach as an early Quaker. There's a number of Roman Catholics who have lobbied the Vatican to have Bach recognised as a Catholic saint.

[ 3 : 03 ] That would be very difficult. Albert Schweitzer said that Bach was the preeminent romanticist. And a number of Marxist musicians in East Germany, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, I read this this week, argue that Bach was not religious at all, but he used music as a vehicle for his proletarian music.

Now, despite this, Bach was a committed Christian throughout his life. After he died, his library, which was entirely made up of Bible works and Bible commentaries, many of which had notes in the margin, each day he would seek to translate a passage of the Bible and read it.

And they reveal a deep understanding of the Gospel. In his younger days, he wrote this, that his purpose is to advance music in the divine service, towards its end and goal, a well-regulated church music in the honour of God.

And all the pieces of music that exist from Bach's hand begin and end, they're bracketed with several initials.

They finish with the initials SDG, Soli Deo Gloria, To God Alone Be Glory, but they begin with JJ, which is Jesus Juva, Jesus Help, which I think is a wonderful way to start anything.

[ 4 : 31 ] Everything Bach wrote, of course, was centred around his devotion to God through Christ. And nothing is more pivotal than his cantatas.

He wrote over 300, and we have something around 200 available, I understand. Here's the thing, the purpose of the cantatas was not to be a work of art on their own.

They are a musical sermon, and their purpose is to carry the word of God forward. And usually they were placed between the Bible readings and the sermon, because the services in those days were three hours long, which is a very good thing.

And they were written to, and they preached directly. I mean, just look back at the base recitativo. I mean, the base can say things that I can't say. He says, Thou child of God, consider what complete devotion the Saviour showed for you in his supreme atonement, and down the bottom of that section, repent now of your guilt in tears.

This is preaching, and that's what Bach had intended at the beginning. The cantatas are not pleasant, diversionary pieces of music. They were not written to entertain.

[ 5 : 49 ] And Bach would be appalled if people appreciated the beauty, but not the content. No, they are written to challenge, and to comfort, if you will, to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.

They are not mood music, they are word music. And Bach's intent is to lay open for us the reality of our human condition as it comes to us in the scriptures, as weak, subject to temptation and sin, and our need of a Saviour, Jesus Christ, and the great grace and safety that we have in his death and resurrection.

And each of the cantatas would take the Bible readings, and would draw them out and preach them, and they would often do so being crafted around one of Luther's hymns. And such is the cantata we are looking at today.

This is written around one of Luther's hymns. Just look at the chorus under Psalm 61. A stronghold sure is God our Lord, whose strength will never fail us.

He keeps us free from all the horde of troubles that assail us. Our every evil foe doth know this right well. Though dread his power be, he plans his projects vile, yet God is all triumphant.

[ 7 : 14 ] See, he says, God is our stronghold sure, a high tower, a high rock, a refuge, and a safe place.

And the idea didn't originate with Luther. The idea comes to us from ancient hymns written 3,000 years ago, the Psalms. And Luther is echoing the words of Psalm 61.

And Bach is teaching us to sing these words so that we might enter into this psalm. This week, we watched a house being demolished just across the laneway from where we live.

And it is a, it's a definitely unsettling experience. And the demolition takes place in two very different phases. In the first phase, a team of workers came and stripped the house bare.

They took the roof, they took some of the walls, they took the windows, they took everything on the outside. And the house stood there looking vaguely exposed and insecure and vulnerable. And then after four days, a grader came in and took 20 minutes and demolished the house flat.

[ 8 : 23 ] Now, what this psalm does is something very similar to us in two movements. It reveals to us that God is our only refuge.

It tells us that he is the one who may meet our most deep need. And yet, it is an unsettling psalm and it unsettles us in two phases. If you look at the psalm, there are two halves.

In verses 1 to 4, it exposes our insecurity by revealing God's majestic security. And in the second half, it reveals our mortality by opening us up to the eternity of God.

And the wonderful thing is that it doesn't just place God's eternity and our mortality together, but it brings them into connection and it shows us that God is offering himself to us to be our security and to give us eternity.

So let's look at it quickly together. In the first four verses, the security God offers. When my heart is faint, lead thou me to the rock that is higher than I.

[ 9 : 34 ] Here is someone who feels his insecurity very deeply. He is afraid and he is exhausted. And he's been on the cutting edge for so long that he's got the cuts to prove it.

And the cutting edge is so sharp, he's about to fall off into the abyss and he feels a long way away from where he needs to be, a deep sense of homeliness and feels that God is away from him.

And the difficulty of what is happening in his life around him is taking its inward toll. When he says, my heart is faint, the word means turning over, turning over. His heart is full of anxiety and he cannot fix it.

You see, there's nothing stoical about faith in God. Faith in God does not mean we put on a happy face.

In fact, if you trust in God through Jesus Christ, your life may become more difficult. But it means you don't face those difficulties by yourself. The psalmist recognises his deep inner struggle and he recognises that he is at the end of his resources, that he cannot go any further.

[ 10 : 46 ] And in a moment of spiritual honesty, he turns to God because he recognises that at root, all our problems have to do with God. And so he prays this prayer, lead me to the rock that is higher than I, to the rock which is secure and the rock that offers protection is saying, God is my rock.

God alone, he says, offers ultimate protection. God stands above my insecurities and fears. God is my high rock and my refuge.

And we are a deeply insecure people. Our neighbours in the United States have created an office of Homeland Security in response to September 11th.

This week, Ottawa announced plans to spend \$140 million on a high security courthouse for federal judges dealing with immigration cases. But our insecurity comes closer to home, doesn't it?

And you may be someone who has 16 PhDs and yet you know what it is to be threatened by a question from someone younger than you. Or you may be someone who has almost limitless wealth and yet you know what it is to spend money on security.

[ 12 : 06 ] Or you may be someone very beautiful. Although I can't see anyone like this this morning and so I'm not talking about anyone in particular. But you have the double insecurity don't you of growing old or of having someone else who's more beautiful next to you.

There's nothing wrong with beauty and education and wealth. It's just that they cannot make you secure. That we need something higher. We need this rock that's high enough not only to be secure above our insecurities but to draw us up so that we can look down and see ourselves and see our insecurities differently.

The remarkable thing about the God of the Bible is that he holds himself out to us to be our rock. He doesn't just sit back in the safety of heaven and throw out gifts from on high.

He offers himself to us to bind himself to us and to bind us to himself and to lift us into the shelter of his love. And this thought is so remarkable that King David gives us three more pictures.

Let's read verses 3 and 4 together shall we? For thou art my refuge a strong tower against the enemy let me dwell in thy tent forever oh to be safe under the shelter of thy wings.

[ 13 : 33 ] each image is more personal than the last. God being a refuge and strong tower it's God's power it's God's strength. But then we read a picture of God desiring to be in the tent with God.

It's a it's a personal picture where God will travel with us through the different difficulties of our life. And then finally to gather us in the embrace of the shelter of his wings.

It's what it means when we say God is our high rock our stronghold shore. God is far more than adequate to all our insecurities and fears. He is sufficient.

He is more than all our grief. To know him is to know that we cannot trust in the other security. God is our protection and home.

Now that means that moves us quickly into the second section from the security that God offers to the eternity that he offers. And so we read in verse 5 For thou, O God hast heard my vows.

[ 14 : 39 ] Thou hast given me the heritage with those that fear thy name. God is not just a rock and stronghold. God has purposes for us. He wants to draw us into an internal inheritance.

to share himself with us forever and ever. You see the first half of the psalm when it speaks about security that is protection from.

But the second half of the psalm speaks about inheritance which is our protection for. Because when God binds us to himself he doesn't do a temporary and interim job.

He doesn't pick us up so that he can drop us down later. He shares his life with us now and that life continues through death itself. And that means that the heritage which is ours is unlimited inalienable unassailable.

It is owned by God and not subject to depreciation or economic downturns or rust or wrinkles. miracles. And you may be saying to yourself how can that possibly be true?

[ 15 : 48 ] And the answer has to do with the king in the next verse. Prolong the life of the king. May his years endure to all generations.

May he be enthroned forever before God. God. Until now the psalmist only had two people God and the psalmist.

But now there is a third person this king and the reason is that the eternal nature of our security is bound up with the life of this king. The writer is a king King David and he knows he is mortal and he is praying for a king who will come who will live forever through all generations.

A king who will come from God bearing the life of God in his hands. A king who will be the son of God born of a virgin. A king who has the capability to give us an inheritance which is eternal. He is speaking about the person of Jesus Christ and if you've missed that that's what Bach is driving at. Look down at the first aria the first soprano aria standing alone are we undone absolutely the fiend Satan would soon enslave us but for us fights a mighty one whom God has sent to save us ask ye who this be Christ Jesus is he God's answer to king David's prayer was far more wonderful than David could ever have imagined as the writer of one of the gospel accounts of Jesus life puts it for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life or as Jesus himself said truly truly

[ 17 : 53 ] I say to you anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life don't you think one of the most damaging myths in our culture today is the myth that we can be all that we want to be those of us with teenage parents and have been exposed to the advertising for spider-man and star wars know this myth very powerfully we have limitless potential all we need to do is believe in ourselves and our dreams will come true the only limits I put on myself are the limits of my imagination it is not true then along come the builders and they strip us of our roof and our windows and of our exterior niceties and very soon we can hear the greater coming and it doesn't take very long until we are completely demolished by death itself the truth is we are not defined by our limitless human potential we are defined by the limitless love and kindness of God we are not defined by being all that we can be we are defined by the fact that

Jesus died for us we are not defined by belief in ourselves but by belief in that death and in that resurrection that is why the psalmist speaks about God about this king being enthroned forever because in the day that he rose again from the dead he went to the right hand of God and there he sits enthroned and the purpose of that enthronement is to give to us the gift that is his the gift of eternal life and our eternal security and our eternal inheritance comes to us from the hands of that same Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection he is our security he is our dignity he is our delight and we take refuge in him and that's why the psalm has this very happy ending why don't we read verse 8 together so will I ever sing praises to thy name as I pay my vows today how grateful ought we to be and I wonder we should sing praises to God day by day and offer prayer because he offers to us what we cannot create for ourselves and he gives himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ for the sake of our deepest deepest needs he is a rock against every security he is the source of life and as I am speaking to you this morning God is speaking and as we are listening to this God is speaking and he is calling on each of us to place our trust and our confidence in this Jesus Christ who has come to die for us and who has raised above all others to be that highest rock who reigns in the glory of God and offers us life with him forever and ever and ever amen this digital audio file along with many others is available from the St.

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