

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER



*God Is on
the Cross*

Reflections on Lent
and Easter



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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE



Since Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote before the days of inclusive gender, his works reflect a male-oriented world in which, for example, the German words for “human being” and “God” are masculine, and male gender was understood as common gender. In this respect, his language has, for the most part, been updated in accordance with the practices of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV); that is, most references to human beings have become gender-inclusive, whereas references to the Deity have remained masculine.

While scriptural quotations are mostly from the NRSV, it was necessary at times to substitute the King James Version (KJV), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), or a literal translation of Luther’s German version, as quoted by Bonhoeffer, in order to allow the author to make his point. In a few other cases, the translation was adjusted to reflect the wording of the NRSV.

O. C. Dean Jr.

EDITOR'S PREFACE



This devotional brings together daily reflections from one of the twentieth century's most beloved theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). These reflections have been chosen especially for Lent and Easter, a time when the liturgical calendar highlights several themes of Bonhoeffer's beliefs and teachings: that self-denial is a necessary aspect of a Christian life; that the cross is central to human understanding; and that, without the atonement, every one of us would stand forever in the role of Judas. Overall, the theme of suffering for Christ runs through Bonhoeffer's work as one of the "costs" of discipleship. "It is not the religious act that makes the Christian," he wrote, "but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world."¹

Although he came from a well-to-do family, by the time he wrote most of the content in this book, Bonhoeffer was well acquainted with suffering. Just two days after Adolf Hitler had seized control of Germany in early 1933, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio sermon in which he criticized the new regime and warned Germans that "the Führer concept" was dangerous and wrong. "Leaders of offices which set themselves up as gods mock God," his address concluded. But Germany never got to hear those final statements,

because Bonhoeffer's microphone had been switched off mid-transmission.² This began a twelve-year struggle against Nazism in Germany, with Bonhoeffer running afoul of authorities and being arrested in 1943. Much of the content of this book was written during the two years he spent in prison.

For Bonhoeffer, waiting was a fact of life during the war: waiting to be released from prison; waiting to be able to spend more than an hour a month in the company of his young fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer; waiting for the end of the war. In his absence, friends and former students were killed in battle and his parents' home was bombed; there was little he could do about any of this except pray and wield a powerful pen. Still he tried to live the words he wrote in this now-famous poem:

And if you hand us the heavy cup, the bitter one,
of sorrow, filled to the highest brim,
then we take it thankfully, without trembling,
from your good and loving hand.

For Bonhoeffer, the cup of sorrow may indeed have seemed heavy at times. When the Third Reich crumbled in April 1945, Hitler ordered the execution of some political prisoners who had conspired to overthrow him. Since papers had recently been discovered that confirmed Bonhoeffer's involvement in this anti-Nazi plot, the theologian was among those scheduled to be killed in one of Hitler's final executive decrees.³ Bonhoeffer was hanged on April 8, 1945, just ten days before German forces began to surrender and less than three weeks before Hitler's

own death by suicide. Bonhoeffer was thirty-nine years old. The camp doctor at Flossenbürg wrote this about the theologian's execution:

On the morning of that day between five and six o'clock the prisoners . . . were taken from their cells and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this unusually lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps of the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."⁴

Although Bonhoeffer's death (and the narrow timing of it) is tragic, we are fortunate that he was a prolific writer who left behind so many lectures, papers, letters, and diary entries from which we may piece together his theology.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book begins with Ash Wednesday and ends with Easter Sunday, encompassing the entire

Lenten season. Because the dates for Lent and Easter change each year, there are no calendar dates in this devotional, but you can easily find your place by knowing, for example, that it is the Saturday of the second week of Lent.

The weeks of Lent are arranged by theme—prayerful reflection, self-denial, temptation, suffering, and the cross—with a final series of devotions for Holy Week (Palm Sunday to Easter). Each day's devotion has a reflection from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Scripture to contemplate, and some bonus material. Although some of these additional short reflections come from other Christians throughout history, most of them are drawn from Bonhoeffer's own letters, sermons, and poetry, giving a glimpse of his attempt to live out a theology of Christian hope even when imprisoned and separated from family and beloved friends. It's important to remember how Bonhoeffer's beliefs were forged in the crucible of war and protest, and did not simply fall from the sky; it's equally important to recognize how intimately connected he was to those he loved.

LENT WEEK ONE



PRAYERFUL
REFLECTION

ASH WEDNESDAY



God Deceives No One

In the beginning, even before the start of his ministry, Jesus is tempted by the devil. The powers of evil, of falling away from God, approach him and try to bring him down at the very moment when he is assuming his role as Messiah (Luke 4:3–4). Luke reports that Jesus is famished, and then the devil confronts him: If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread. If you have the power of God, then use it for yourself. Perform a miracle: turn the stone into bread, and you will be filled. Why, after all, do you have such power? If you are the Son of God, prove your power. . . . In this voice of apparent intercessory love, Jesus recognizes the voice of the devil. It was an outrageous suggestion, and he rejects the devil: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Here that means basically: God deceives no one.



“And take up their cross.” That cross is already there, ready, from the very beginning; we need only take it up. But to keep us from believing that we must simply choose any arbitrary cross, or simply pick out our suffering as we will, Jesus emphasizes that each of us has his or her *own* cross, ready, appointed, and appropriately measured by God.¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*



Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

Psalm 51:1–3

FIRST THURSDAY OF LENT



Prayer

The fact that we can pray is not something to be taken for granted. It is true that prayer is a natural need of the human heart, but that does not give us any right before God. . . . We pray to the God in whom we believe through Christ. Therefore our prayer can never be a conjuring up of God; we do not need to present ourselves before him. We can know that God knows what we need before we ask for it. That gives our prayer the greatest confidence and a happy certainty. It is neither the formula nor the number of words but faith that reaches God in his fatherly heart, which has long known us. The proper prayer is not a deed, not an exercise, not a pious attitude, but the petition of a child to the heart of the Father.



We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts.²

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*



“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Matthew 6:5–6

FIRST FRIDAY OF LENT



God Is Not a Matter of Mood

We say that religion is a matter of mood: we must wait until the mood strikes us. And then we often wait for years—perhaps until the end of our life—until we are once again in the mood to be religious. This idea is based on a great illusion. It is all well and good to let religion be a matter of mood but God is not a matter of mood. He is still present even when we are not in the mood to meet with him. . . . In religion, as in art and science, there are—in addition to times of great excitement—times of sober work and practice. Interaction with God must be practiced; otherwise we will not find the right tone, the right word, the right language, when he surprises us. We must learn God's language, laboriously learn it. And we must work at it, so that we will be able to talk with him.



The morning prayer determines the day. Squandered time of which we are ashamed, temptations to which we succumb, weaknesses and lack of courage in work, disorganization and lack of discipline in our thoughts and in our conversation . . . all have their origin most often in the neglect of morning prayer. ³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*



O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.

Psalm 5:3