



# Dietrich Bonhoeffer

**Biography Timeline:** **February 4, 1906**, born, along with his twin sister, Sabine, in Breslau, Germany, two of the eight children of Karl Bonhoeffer and Paula (von Hase) Bonhoeffer; **1912**, family moves to Berlin, where father teaches neurology and psychiatry and heads University Hospital, being Germany's leading empirical psychologist; **1919**, announces he has decided to become a theologian; **March 15, 1921**, confirmed at Grunewald Church, Berlin; grows up in comfortable bourgeois circumstances; **1924-1927**, writes his dissertation, "*Sanctorum Communio*," at the University of Berlin, and awarded his doctorate with honors at the age of 21; **1928**, serves as vicar of a German Lutheran congregation in Barcelona; **July 1930**, "*Act and Being*," his qualifying thesis allowing him to teach at the University of Berlin, accepted; **1930-1931**, spends postgraduate year at Union Theological Seminary in New York (including regular work at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem); **1931**, appointed youth secretary of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches; **August 1931**, assumes post as a lecturer in theology at the University of Berlin in; **November 1931**, ordained at St. Matthias Church, Berlin; **1931-1932**, presents lectures later published as *Creation and Fall*; **January 30, 1933**, Adolf Hitler becomes Reich Chancellor; **February 1, 1933**, Bonhoeffer's radio talk "*Changes in the Concept of the Leader Principle*" is cut off air before completion; **1933**, gives final lecture courses at Berlin-- later published as *Christ the Center*; **September 7, 1933**, collaborates with Martin Niemöller to organize the Pastors' Emergency League, a group of 2000 Lutheran pastors opposed to the control of the state church by the Nazis, before assuming the pastorate of the German Evangelical Church, Sydenham, and the Reformed Church of St. Paul in London; **1934**, becomes member of the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work; **May 1934**, Confessing Church organized at Barmen, Germany; **1935**, assumes leadership of the Confessing Church's clandestine seminary at Zingsthoof by the Baltic Sea--a school relocated later that year to Finkenwalde in Pomerania; **August 1-5, 1936**, preaches at Olympic Village, and thereafter authorization to teach on University of Berlin faculty is withdrawn; **October, 1937**, Finkenwalde Seminary closed by Gestapo; **February 1938**, begins participation in Abwehr resistance circle with the task of being a courier and diplomat to the British government on behalf of the resistance; **1940-1943**, in between his activities for the resistance, stays at Ettal (Benedictine monastery outside of Munich) as he works on a book, what will become *Ethics*; **January 17, 1943**, becomes engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer; **spring 1943**, attempts to help group of Jews escape to Switzerland; **April 5, 1943**, arrested and imprisoned; **July 20, 1944**, assassination attempt on Hitler's life fails; **October 8, 1944**, transferred to cellar of Gestapo prison in Prinz Albrecht Strasse; **February 5, 1945**, transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp; **April 3, 1945**, moved to Regensburg; **April 5, 1945**, moved to Schonborg; **April 8, 1945**, transported to Flossenbürg and court-martialed; **April 9, 1945**, is executed by hanging, on Himmler's orders, in Flossenbürg concentration camp; burial place ultimately unknown; **April 30, 1945**, Hitler commits suicide in the Führerbunker, beneath the Reich Chancellery buildings in Berlin, effectively ending World War II on the European front; **July 27, 1945**, memorial services for Bonhoeffer held at Holy Trinity Church, London, England, after the encouragement of Bishop of Chichester; **April 9, 1946**, memorial service held in Berlin; memorial erected in Dorotheenstadt cemetery, Berlin; **1951**, first German edition of prison letters written during final two years of his life, collected/edited by his student and friend, Eberhard Bethge, published as *Widerstand und Ergebung* (meaning *Resistance and Submission*); **1953**, first English edition of prison letters published as *Prisoner for God* and later as *Letters and Papers from Prison*; **1973**, International Bonhoeffer Society - English Language Section founded; **2015**, The Bonhoeffer Center website begins.

Born a twin on February 4, 1906, in Breslau, Germany, the second of eight children of Karl Bonhoeffer and Paula (von Hase) Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer would become one of the most admired Christians the world has ever seen.<sup>(1)</sup> Though he grew up in comfortable bourgeois circumstances, and though his precocious intellect

might have propelled him toward an enviable academic career, Bonhoeffer found the greatest vocational fulfillment and the broadest expression of his personal faith in the midst of resisting the evil of Nazism.

After attaining his doctorate in theology at the age of 21, Bonhoeffer spent three years as a Lutheran vicar in Barcelona. Then he enjoyed a postgraduate year abroad at Union Theological Seminary in New York, including work at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Later on, Bonhoeffer was invited to become part of the Union faculty. Though he appreciated the opportunity, he could not forsake the call to come home as Germany descended into the insanity of Adolf Hitler's reign.

Back in Germany, the day after Adolf Hitler became Reich Chancellor, Bonhoeffer's radio talk "*Changes in the Concept of the Leader Principle*" was silenced before its completion. With Martin Niemoeller he organized the Pastors' Emergency League, a group of 2000 Lutheran pastors opposed to the control of the church by the Nazis.

Bonhoeffer then helped to organize the Confessing Church at Barmen, Germany, and assumed leadership of the Confessing Church's clandestine seminary. For three years, he was a member of Abwehr, a group of conspirators which ostensibly gathered intelligence for German authorities but which also served as the organizing center of anti-Hitler plots and planned several assassination attempts on Hitler. Because of his involvement in Abwehr and his attempt to help a group of Jews escape to Switzerland, he was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo. After enduring two years in prison, including separation from his fiancée and a stint at the Buchenwald concentration camp, he awaited his death with equanimity and peace. He was executed a mere three weeks before Hitler committed suicide and the Nazis surrendered.

Though he died a mere two months and four days beyond his 39<sup>th</sup> birthday, Dietrich Bonhoeffer became in his martyrdom one of modernity's most profound theologians and one of the world's most courageous witnesses for good.

Because of Bonhoeffer, certain catchphrases and watchwords have come into immense popularity in Christian circles.

"A world come of age" is how Bonhoeffer described the complexities of the world, including radical evil, to be faced by one and all in 20th century.(2)

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die" is how Bonhoeffer described the call of faith and the risk of conversion, a death to old ways of living life when we did not have the needs of our neighbors and the example of Jesus of Nazareth as premier guidance for our actions.(3)

In his intellectual pursuits, in his preaching, and in his personal actions, Bonhoeffer warned against "cheap grace," urging instead that there is always a "costly discipleship" involved in following after the example of Jesus of Nazareth.(4)

To the students in his "underground seminary" and to the untold readers of his book on the Psalms, he showed clearly and persuasively that "The Psalms are Jesus' Prayerbook."(5)

For countless undergraduate and graduate students, Bonhoeffer's books, particularly *Ethics* and *The Cost of Discipleship*, are required reading. For numberless religious seekers of all faiths, other of Bonhoeffer's books – principally *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Life Together*, *The Psalms* – continue to be founts of inspiration and challenge.

Many have lamented “what might have been” – in the world of theology, in ecumenical relations, for the Church as a whole worldwide, and for inter-religious dialogue – had Bonhoeffer’s execution been delayed beyond the time of Hitler’s suicide and thus avoided.

In addition to being a theologian, a seminary professor, a caring fiancé, a devoted friend, and a partner in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer was a person of prayer. He regarded prayer as ultimately personal, always tinged with intimate connections, the way a child’s life is bound to a parent. Prayer – both individually on behalf of others and together with other believers – was ultimately what Bonhoeffer believed connected him within the human community: “... intercession is the most promising way to reach our neighbours, and corporate prayer, offered in the name of Christ, the purest form of fellowship.”(6)

Bonhoeffer held that, for Christians, prayer is made possible by Jesus Christ, whose resurrected life is a mediation between the Christian and God. Jesus’s instructions and exemplary prayer for his first disciples show all subsequent followers how to pray.(7)

In the throes of his imprisonment by the Nazis, he would cling to prayer as the source for his own enduring.(8)

Bonhoeffer’s last recorded words, right after preaching his last sermon and just as the executioners came for him on April 8, 1945, are the substance of faith itself: “This is the end... for me the beginning of life.”(9) They can also be understood as a sublime prayer.

Bonhoeffer believed that by steeping oneself in prayer and meditation one more fully becomes a bearer of God's Word. He believed in praying the Psalms specifically for several reasons: (a) The Psalms reflect life in all of its fullness and complexities, all of its exhilarating joys and disappointing defeats. (b) The Psalms are important because Jesus prayed the Psalms. (c) The Psalms are to be prayed so we can begin to understand how to pray in the name of Jesus Christ.(10)

### **A Petition for Others**

#### **Bonhoeffer's Prayer for Fellow-Prisoners**

(composed for Christmas 1943, at suggestion of Tegel prison chaplain, Harald Poelchau)

*O God, early in the morning I cry to thee.  
Help me to pray  
And to concentrate my thoughts on thee;  
I cannot do this alone.*

*In me there is darkness,  
But with thee there is light;  
I am lonely, but thou leavest me not;  
I am feeble in heart, but with thee there is help;  
I am restless, but with thee there is patience;  
I do not understand thy ways,  
But thou knowest the way for me.*

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
Thou werest poor  
and in distress, a captive and forsaken as I am.  
Thou knowest all man's troubles;  
Thou abidest with me  
when all men fail me;  
Thou rememberest and seekest me;  
It is thy will that I should know thee  
and turn to thee.  
Lord, I hear thy call and follow;  
Do thou help me.(11)*

### **A Quest of the Self**

*"WHO AM I?"  
....Who am I? This or the other?*

*Am I one person today and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?  
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,  
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?*

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine?  
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine. (12)*

## **Praying with Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Suggestions for Use**

- Day 1 Pray today for wisdom and steadfastness as you carefully and honestly consider the “world come of age” in which you dwell. Seek God’s guidance about how you will engage with the world, especially with other persons, in ways that will faithfully contribute to healing and wholeness.
- Day 2 Pray today as child, considering God as an ultimate parental influence and a listening ear, someone who, like a parent, will never forsake you. Reflect on your deep dependency on God for your very breath and the geophysical forces that make life on earth even possible. Give thanks to God for loving you deep and eternally.
- Day 3 Let your prayers today be meditative, as you focus on how God may be calling you to “die” to old, ineffective ways of life and faith. Allow the themes of your meditation be the needs of your neighbors and Jesus’ exemplary ways of relating with others.
- Day 4 Let your prayers be infused today with the theme of thanksgiving as you offer your gratitude for the “costly grace” of God’s love.
- Day 5 Pick two or three of psalms from the book of The Psalms as prayers for recitation today. Remember that Bonhoeffer regarded The Psalms as *“The Prayerbook of Jesus.”*
- Day 6 Pray in honor of Dietrich Bonhoeffer today. Offer prayers of solidarity for those suffering persecution – social, cultural, political. Pray particularly for the poor and those without any sphere of influence.
- Day 7 Pray today by reciting Bonhoeffer’s *“A Quest of the Self.”* Ponder Bonhoeffer’s plaintive question, “Or is something within me still like a beaten army,/ fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?” Then offer your affirmation that, whoever you are, you, like the rest of the family of humanity, are God’s.

## NOTES

- (1) For a full telling of Bonhoeffer's life see Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2000); see also Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (New York: T& T Clark, 2010) and Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014).
- (2) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1971), p. 326.
- (3) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone edition, 1995), p. 89.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- (5) See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970.)
- (6) Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, p. 98.
- (7) *Ibid.*, pp. 59 and 95.
- (8) Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 379, 392..
- (9) Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, p. 927.
- (10) Bonhoeffer, *The Psalms*, p. 13.
- (11) Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 139-140; see also J. Martin Bailey and Douglas Gilbert, *The Steps of Bonhoeffer: A Pictorial Album* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: United Church Press, 1969).
- (12) Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 348.

## FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, AND REFLECTION

- J. Martin Bailey and Douglas Gilbert, *The Steps of Bonhoeffer: A Pictorial Album* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: United Church Press, 1969)
- Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970)
- Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2000)
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone edition, 1995)
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- Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014)