

# Bonhoeffer and Prayer

By The Rev. Lloyd Buss, Ph.D.

The last image history has recorded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is naked and kneeling in prayer on the threshold of eternity and freedom just before his execution on the personal order of Adolf Hitler. It is an image that serves well in remembering that the subject Bonhoeffer and Prayer cannot be separated from Bonhoeffer and Germany, 1906—1945. In the last poem he wrote, *Surrounded by Kindly Powers*<sup>1</sup>, he recalled the privileges he had and faced the twin possibilities—death or a future in freedom. Written in the detention cellar in Prinz Albrecht-Strasse it is a Gethsemane prayer— “Lord, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, thy will and not mine be done.” Although the poem has been turned into a hymn, and memorized by many, it is a prayer of thanksgiving for the “kindly powers” that had surrounded him all his life---family, friends, colleagues etc.

Born in 1906 and raised in a family of good standing, Bonhoeffer was eight and a half years old when World War I broke out. Two of his brothers, Karl-Frederick and Walter, were called into military service, followed shortly afterward by Klaus. Both Karl and Walter were wounded but Walter died of his wounds. Not too long after Walter’s death, Dietrich announced that he had decided to become a theologian. When Dietrich was confirmed three years later, his mother gave him Walter’s Bible inscribed with II Cor. 3:6 “The letter kills but the Spirit gives life”. It would become a solid reference that no principle can ever possess absolute validity, even in what his professor Adolf Harnack had inspired him to pursue truth born out of freedom.

A brilliant student, Bonhoeffer’s path to theology had really begun in a more secular atmosphere and his interest in theology had been much more philosophical than religious. Unlike many who had entered the study of theology from families active in the church and discovering the world later, Bonhoeffer had started his journey from the world and discovered the church. Bonhoeffer was focused on his university studies and his dissertation on *Sanctorum Communio* with the subtitle “A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church” introduced the use of social philosophy and sociology in the service of theology. He argued that only in the conception of

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<sup>1</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Voices in the Night*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1999. 123-124

God secured in the social body could the essence of faith be understood. Bonhoeffer's message was clear: Christ exists in community. In his section on The Community Being "For One Another" he writes "the structure of the community is such that where one of its members is, it is there too, in its strength, in the strength, that is, of Christ and the Holy Spirit...in considering intercession from God's standpoint, it is seen to be individuals organizing themselves in order to bring about God's will for others so that they may serve the realization of God's governing will in the community".<sup>2</sup> Prayer was the hallmark and lifeblood of the church.

Sent to Barcelona as vicar to a German congregation as part of his preparation for ordination, Bonhoeffer observed the effects of the depression enveloping Europe and emphasized how Christ will not leave people alone in their troubles. In his sermon on the First Sunday of Advent in 1928 he said "God wants to always be with us, wherever we may be...in our sin, in our suffering and death. We are never alone; God is with us. We are no longer homeless; a bit of the eternal home itself has moved into us...Christ stands at the door, he lives in the form of the person in our midst"<sup>3</sup>. He later would say that the path from God to human beings "is the path of Christ, the path of the cross". Bonhoeffer is moving out of the academic classroom into the real world but not quite like the world he had known in his childhood and youth. It made more real for him the question "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"

He returned to Berlin to complete his Habilitation thesis *Act and Being* which would give him admission in Germany's academe at the age of twenty-four, and from his Barcelona parish experience would join God's Act and Being together in the church. In his inaugural lecture in July, 1930 he would say: "It is the mystery of the community that Christ is in her and, only through her, reaches to men. Christ exists among us as community, as Church in the hiddenness of history. The Church is the hidden Christ among us. Now therefore man is never alone, but he exists only through the community which brings him Christ, which incorporates him in itself, takes him into its life. Man in Christ is man in community; where he exists is community, But because at the same time as individual he is fully a member of the community, therefore here alone is the continuity of his existence preserved in Christ. Therefore, man can no longer

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<sup>2</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio—A Dogmatic Investigation of the Sociology of the Church*, Collins and Harper and Row 1963.103

<sup>3</sup> *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Edited by Isabel Best. Fortress Press, Minneapolis. 2012. 8-12

understand himself from himself, but only from Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer’s engagement with the Church in Germany during the Nazi era would not be political but theological.

Still too young to be ordained, he went to Union Seminary in New York for one year as a Sloane Graduate Fellow. The decision to follow an academic career or parish ministry was yet to be made. Union Seminary was an esteemed liberal Protestant seminary and Bonhoeffer’s scholarly discipline in dogmatic theology was unlike Union’s program. It was Reinhold Niebuhr who challenged Bonhoeffer’s claim that the “God of guidance” could only be known by the “God of justification”. Niebuhr responded that “in making grace as transcendent as he had, one cannot ascribe any ethical significance to it. Obedience to the will of God may be a religious experience, but it is not an ethical one until it issues in actions which can be socially valued”. Actions became an important element in Bonhoeffer’s life on his return to Germany, as well as his experiences with the church in Harlem and his visits to many different social organizations addressing basic human needs which made more urgent how to make concrete how Jesus Christ is for us today.

Ordained in November, 1931, Bonhoeffer was assigned to a parish in what he called “just about the worst part of Berlin with the most difficult social and political problems”. When his confirmation class of fifty boys proved unrulier than any of his students at Abyssinian Baptist, he discovered that they would listen to Bible stories, and the more dramatic the better. Using Luther’s catechism as a guide he also taught them the Lord’s Prayer and divided it into “you” petitions concerning God and “our” petitions concerning ourselves. It was important to first think about God and then about us or ourselves. Years later he would write in *“Cost of Discipleship”* that the Lord’s Prayer is not just a general prayer but “it is the way Christians must pray. If they pray this prayer God will certainly hear them.”<sup>5</sup> He would later write that he “came to the Bible for the first time as a new and unexpected meaning broke through ancient words and phrases”. His daily readings from the Moravian prayer book and his devotional disciplines became more intense. The Sermon on the Mount had moved to the center of his thinking because of its simplicity, and directness and concreteness of Jesus’s teaching”. There were signs that Bonhoeffer was making a transition from theologian to Christian.

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Rusty Swords*, translated by Robertson and Bowden, Harper and Row, New York, 1947, 68

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1957. 142

For twelve years, the Weimar Republic had struggled to create order and stability in Germany out of the chaos and anarchy that followed W.W. I, but increasing disruptions emanating from the rising Nationalist Socialist party led by Adolf Hitler against the aging Hindenburg ended in three national elections in five months in 1932 to elect a Chancellor. On January 30, 1933 Hitler was named Chancellor. His Nationalist Socialist party never garnered more than 37 percent of the popular vote. The error of the Germans who opposed the Nazism was their failure to unite against it.

Bonhoeffer joined in protest in a radio address delivered two days into Hitler's rule that warned the German nation of dangers inherent in the "the Leadership (der Fuhrer) principle, and its intrusion into the leadership of the Church. A number of German laity and clergy had supported National Socialism and considered it mutually reinforcing Christianity. In the July election, these German Christians won the majority of seats to the parish councils of the German Evangelical Church. In a letter to dissenting clergy he called the Young Reformation Movement, Bonhoeffer urged them to let him know of any interference in their parishes. Within days the Gestapo called on Bonhoeffer and warned him to cease and desist. On the night of the election he preached in Trinity Church that he had made the decision.

"If it were left to us, we would rather avoid the decisions which are now forced upon us; if it were left to us we would rather not allow ourselves to be caught up in this church struggle...Jesus himself puts the decisive question...who do men say that the Son of Man is...in this immediate confrontation with Christ there can be no "perhaps: or "some say" no opinions but only silence or the answer which Peter gives..."You are the Christ, the Son of the living God...Blessed are you Simon Bar Jona...you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church...we are all Peter...not this man or that, but all of us, who simply live from our confession of faith in Christ...but it is not we who build. He builds the church. No man builds the church but Christ alone...we must confess, he builds...we must proclaim, he builds...we must pray, he builds... do what is given to you to do well. Pay no heed to views or opinions, don't ask for judgment, don't always be calculating which will happen...Christ alone is your Lord, from his grace alone can you live as you are. Christ builds...and the gates of hell shall not prevail against thee."<sup>6</sup>

The appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor on January 30, 1933 was followed by the burning of the Reichstag and the passage of laws including the Law for the Reconstitution of the Civil Services on April 7, which ordered the removal of all Jews, persons of any Jewish descent, and

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<sup>6</sup> *Rusty Swords*, 214f

other designated undesirables from civil service including the churches, both Protestant and Catholic. The German Christians joined in the program emphasis of the Nazis on Volk, Das Reich and Der Fuhrer into the life and program of the Protestant Church.

Bonhoeffer moved quickly into this theological struggle with the German Christians writing an essay "*The Church and the Jewish Question*". This was followed by the Bethel Confession in which it was clearly stated that the "community of those who belong to the church is not determined by blood and therefore not by race but by the Holy Spirit and baptism". And in a very pointed statement to the German Christians "we oppose the attempt to deprive the German Evangelical Church of its promise to change it into a national church of Christians of Aryan descent". With the Young Reformation Group Bonhoeffer wrote a statement to the forthcoming Synod meeting in Wittenberg, that was called the Brown Synod for all the clergy wearing the brown shirts of the Nazi party, to reject the Aryan clause which banned all non-Aryans from civil service. The Brown Synod adopted the Aryan clause into its constitution. It was in essence the difference between Germanism or Christianity.

The Confessing Church quickly created an organizational structure for its ministry that included the writing of the Barmen Declaration with Bonhoeffer involved in writing its first draft and the earlier Bethel statement. Bonhoeffer's efforts to align the Confessing Church with the witness against the Aryan clause were unsuccessful with the decision to remove all references to the Aryan clause in the Barmen Declaration. It demonstrated a lack of moral courage on the condition of remaining a permitted body in the life of Germany. For Bonhoeffer "only he who cries out for the Jews can sing the Gregorian chants."

The formation of seminaries by the Confessing Church was to provide additional training to clergy joining in the struggle against the German Christians. Bonhoeffer was appointed as director of the one of the five seminaries, which briefly met at Zingst and later at Finkenwald, and known as the Emergency Teaching Seminary of the Confessing Church.

For Bonhoeffer, there were two essential ingredients to include in this orientation training for Confessional Church clergy assigned to pastoral ministry. There was their learning how to pray, both alone and together and how to read the Bible. This included rigorous times of "forced" and lengthy private meditations and prayers. The daily schedule for the twenty-three students was

patterned after the monastic communities that Bonhoeffer had visited months before. Each day began and ended in silent meditation with the group assembling in silence in the dining room for prayers and quietly sit until God had spoken some word for the day into hearts or at least one-half hour had passed. They would continue with the morning praises, hymns and the antiphonal reading from the Psalter. Breakfast was followed by devotional exercises in groups of threes, with each in their own carrel. They were encouraged to center their meditation on a single passage for an entire week so as to learn what the verse had to say to them. As several recalled they “were to pray over it, think of our life in its light and use it for intercession on behalf of our families, our brethren and all whom we knew to be in need.” Daily chapel was used to assemble for song as Bonhoeffer regarded music as the theological language par excellence. It is true that one cannot explain creation but it can be sung. Nothing was scheduled between lunch and tea time, but followed by homework, and evenings after dinner featured special lectures and conversations. Evenings ended with compline with much the same order as the morning prayers. With silence ending the day as it had begun, the first and last word of each day was to be God’s Word.

The strongest incentive for this schedule was Bonhoeffer himself, and especially his manner of praying. Bethge writes that at worship, Bonhoeffer spoke almost all the prayers himself. “His prayers were long and usually extemporaneous; occasionally he also used liturgical prayers. He would begin with detailed thanks for the gift of faith, for the seminary’s communal life, for the sun and the sea. Next, he would ask for daily and mutual tolerance within the fellowship. Much time was devoted to prayer for the Confessing Church, its leaders and synods, for those in prison, those who had fallen by the wayside, and for enemies...He devoted much time and trouble to the preparation of these prayers and their inner structure.... He believed that the language of prayer should be modeled and in harmony with that of the Psalms.”<sup>7</sup>

When it came to praying Scripture, Bonhoeffer was drawn to the Psalms for it is “the one book that differs from all other books in the Bible in that it contains only prayers...Prayer does not mean simply to pour out one’s heart. It means rather to find the way to God and speak to him, whether the heart is full or empty. No man can do that by himself. For that he needs Jesus Christ...Only in Jesus Christ are we able to pray, and with him we also know that we shall be

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<sup>7</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography*, Eberhard Bethge. Fortress Press, Minneapolis. 1999. 464

heard...God's speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer. For here we know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, teaches us to pray. The words which come from God become then, the steps on which we find our way to God."<sup>8</sup> In the second chapter of *Psalms*, Bonhoeffer places his Christology at the heart of the *Psalms*. In reading and praying the *Psalms* "we must not ask first what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ. We must ask how we can understand the *Psalms* as God's Word and then we shall be able to pray them...to be sure, the one who prays his *Psalms* remains himself, but in him and through him it is Christ who prays."<sup>9</sup>

There was criticism from some, even calling it legalistic, but Bonhoeffer defended himself and commended his practice in a letter to Karl Barth. "How can it possibly be legalistic for a Christian to learn what prayer is, and to spend a fair amount learning it...the kind of questions young theologians put to us today is How can I learn to pray? How can I learn how to read the Bible? Either we help them to do this, or we can't help them at all." None of this can be taken for granted."<sup>10</sup>

It is compelling to place this schedule for daily prayer in the social, cultural and political life of Germany but Bonhoeffer had no illusions as to this possibility. He acknowledged the Biblical illiteracy of the laity and established the daily reading of Scripture as a major feature of the pattern for prayer and meditation he created for the Confessing Church clergy. For Bonhoeffer, the Scriptures were as Luther had said: "The Bible is the cradle in which we find Christ". But there is more in this schedule of daily prayer than a pattern for devotion and meditation. There is an intensive re-construction of Christology that permeates the whole of Christian living.

This emphasis on Christology grew out of Bonhoeffer's two major interests in his theological writings following his return from the United States where he concentrated on Christian Ethics and the Church. Both required a clarification of his Christology to which he devoted his time in preparing his lecture series on *The Nature of the Church* in 1932. But the rapidly changing events in Germany, including three national elections for Chancellor delayed his lecture series on

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<sup>8</sup> *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Augsburg, Minneapolis. 1990. 11-13.

<sup>9</sup> *Psalms*. 14-19.

<sup>10</sup> *DB*, Bethge. 465

Christology until the summer of 1933, later published from the notes of the students attending his series as *Christ the Center*. At the Youth Peace Conference in Czechoslovakia in 1932 he expressed clearly that “from Christ alone must we know what we should do. But not from him as the preaching prophet of the Sermon on the Mount, but from him as the one who gives us life and forgiveness, as the one who has fulfilled the commandments of God in our place, as the one who brings and promises the new world... Thus we are completely directed toward Christ”.<sup>11</sup> .

In July, 1936 two Confessing Church clergy had been arrested under the law criminalizing all activities associated with “non-assimilated” (non-Nazi) churches. Several months earlier, the Minister of the Interior, Heinrich Himmler, had declared that all examinations before the courts of the Confessing Church were invalid and all participants subject to punishment. By extension this made any affiliation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer tantamount to treason. Prayers of intercession became a daily ritual for the arrested pastors. Within six months, the Minister of the Interior banned the naming of anyone from the pulpit who had either left the Reich church or been removed from their position by reason of conscience. It was also forbidden to hold church services and gatherings on emergency church premises or in secular places. Confessing Church congregations were forbidden to receive offerings during worship services, and to make mimeographed copies of newsletters, sermons et al. The banning of intercessory prayer was the most destructive, for intercessory prayer at Finkenwald brought the face of the petitioner into the face of one for whom Christ died. In September, 1937, the Decree to Restore Order to the German Evangelical Church outlawed and closed the seminaries of the Confessing Church. On July 11, 1937 Bonhoeffer preached on Psalm 58, one of the Psalms which called for the wrath of God against our enemies, that he included in his *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* as an “imprecatory Psalm”. He asked “can the imprecatory psalms be understood as God’s Word for us as the prayer of Jesus Christ”? “Jesus Christ has brought every need, every joy, every gratitude, every hope of men before God. In his mouth the word of man becomes the Word of God and if we pray his prayer with him, the Word of God becomes once again the word of man. All prayers of the Bible are such prayers which we pray together with Jesus Christ, in which he

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<sup>11</sup> *Rusty Swords*, 166

accompanies us, and through which he brings us into the presence of God. Otherwise there are no true prayers, for only in and with Jesus Christ can we truly pray”.<sup>12</sup>

He began his sermon with the question ‘Is this frightful psalm of vengeance our prayer? Are we actually allowed to pray in such a manner...Even in these times of the church’s distress we are compelled to recognize that God in anger has raised a hand against us to afflict us with our own sin, all our spiritual indolence, our open and inward disobedience, the profound lack of discipline in our everyday lives under God’s Word. ...We are not able to pray this psalm...because we are too sinful, too evil for it. ...No, we sinners are not praying this song of vengeance; innocence itself and no other is praying it. The innocence of Christ steps before the world and accuses it. We do not accuse the world. Christ does.’<sup>13</sup>

Bonhoeffer tried to maintain the spirit of Finkenwald with visits, coded letters and conversations, but was forbidden to write, lecture or preach and traveling to Berlin. What had not been included in the bans were carbon copies of letters, which Bonhoeffer would make and send to former students of Finkenwald. When Dr. Frederick Werner was appointed the head of the committee directing the German Evangelical Church, and promised that all clergy would take the oath to pledge allegiance to Adolf Hitler, there was almost no reaction or resistance from the Confessing Church. Realizing the impossibility of having the church lead the resistance and future rebirth of Germany, Bonhoeffer made his first contact with the resistance through his brother Klaus and brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, members of the German military intelligence called the Abwehr, who had no doubts about the inevitability of war.

Encouraged to leave Germany and return to the United States, Reinhold Niebuhr arranged for a teaching position at Union Seminary in New York and in June, 1939, Bonhoeffer left Germany to take the position. Within several weeks, his decision weighed heavily on him but his Bible reading did not offer quick remedies, nor did Lamentations, the Psalms and the Hebrew prophets. His readings from the Moravian Brethren devotional book kept him in sync with Bethge and other brethren. Letters included such news as all baptisms in Germany were concluded with the prayer that “this child will grow up to be like Adolph Hitler and (Heinrich) Himmler”, that University theology departments existed for the sole purpose of erecting the foundation for the

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<sup>12</sup> *Psalms*. 13-14

<sup>13</sup> *A Testament to Freedom, Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Edited by Kelly and Nelson, Harper. San Francisco 1995. 279-283.

new State ethics and that the University of Jena had created the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on Germany's Religious Life. Pondering Isaiah 41:9 "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you out" and Psalm 28:7 "The Lord is my strength and my shield, in him my heart trusts, so I am helped and my heart exults and with my song I give thanks to him", he aborted his stay at Union and returned to Germany.

Confronted with the mandatory call-up to military service, Bonhoeffer applied for service as a military chaplain but was denied after a six-month wait. He was also told that the Reich Central Office of Security had deemed his teaching and preaching subversive and would have to appear and report regularly to police in a village near Finkenwald. Accepted as a civilian employee of the Abwehr he began service as a courier and diplomat to the British government, and also provide classified information to the Allies and lobby for their support. For years Bonhoeffer regarded himself as a pacifist and early in his career had planned to go to India and study the ways of non-violent resistance with Gandhi. He had considered and rejected registering as a conscientious objector but believed that would desecrate the lives of his students and never condemned those who had been called or volunteered to serve. With the organized Confessing Church in shambles, remaining at best a movement with very few means of resistance, Bonhoeffer moved into active conspiracy and served as theologian and pastor to both conspirator and collaborator. In his Easter sermon in Stettin in 1940 he said "Those who affirm the resurrection of Christ in faith can no longer flee the world, nor can they still be enslaved by world, for within the old creation they have perceived the new creation of God".<sup>14</sup>

With the encirclement of the SS, Gestapo and the Reich church ever closer, Bonhoeffer struggled to maintain contact with as many former students from Finkenwald as possible through secret visits, reunions and coded messages but found meaning and substance in the knowledge and experience in their daily reading the same Bible readings, singing the same hymns, the same intercessory prayers and their shared devotions. When the publication of his *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* had provoked the Reich Chamber of Literature they ruled the two other books, "*Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* "subversive in effect". It was obvious that Bonhoeffer's freedom was being increasingly restricted and it ended with his arrest on April 4, 1943.

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<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, *DBW*, vol 16, 474-475

Much can be said about Bonhoeffer's decision to join in actual resistance against the Nazi state. But as early as 1933 he had listed three possibilities of church action towards the state: "In the first place it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as state, i.e., it can throw the state back on its responsibilities. Secondly, it can aid the victims of state action. The state has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do (not) belong to the Christian community. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself".<sup>15</sup> One can ask whether putting a spoke in the wheel is the same as killing the leaders of the state, but for Bonhoeffer it became clear that his rigorous ethical standards no longer worked. The question was simply which is the greater guilt, that of tolerating Hitler and the Nazi ideology or removing it. Anyone who was not ready to kill Hitler would be guilty of mass murder. Bonhoeffer would insist that there are situations where a Christian must become guilty out of love for his neighbor. Bonhoeffer never completed his Ethics while in prison but the issue of guilt was a major feature of the notes that were finally gathered and published. "If any man tries to escape guilt in responsibility he detaches himself from the ultimate reality of human existence, and what is more he cuts himself off from the redeeming mystery of Christ's bearing guilt without sin and he has no share in the divine justification which lies upon his event."<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer did not try to resolve this paradox by assuming a moral innocence but in a letter to his friend, Bethge in May, 1943 he writes that "what we cannot do, we must now simply let go and limit ourselves to what we can and should do, that is, be manly and strong in trust in God in the midst of our suffering." In his journal notes later retrieved from the prison, Bonhoeffer had jotted down a number of words... Separation...self-deception...waiting—but e.g. quite composed for death. Sick...profoundly alone. Suicide, not because of consciousness of guilt but basically, I am already dead, draw a line. Summing up. Is the memory better for joyful impressions? What is past. A past grief stands under the sign of its being overcome, only griefs that have not been overcome (unforgiven sin) are always fresh and tormenting to the memory. Overcoming in prayer."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Rusty Swords*, 223

<sup>16</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Ethics*, translated by Eberhard Bethge. MacMillan Company, New York, 1955. 210

<sup>17</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison*. Enlarged Edition. SCM Press. London. 1953. 33-35

Within months, Bonhoeffer had established a regular pattern for each day. Using the Latin designations for the Sundays to date his correspondence and writing, he used his Moravian prayer book for the readings and prayers, and within the first six-month had already read the Old Testament two and a half times. “Waiting with Christ” inspired the shape of each day’s meditation, thanksgiving, intercessory prayer<sup>18</sup>, praise and lament.

The collapse of the Confessing Church in the onslaught from the Nazi ideology within the Reich Church made Bonhoeffer ask “What is Christianity, or who is Christ for us today?” In a letter to Bethge on April 30 he wrote that “We are approaching a completely religionless age. People as they are simply cannot be religious anymore...How can Christ become Lord of the religionless as well...in the meantime, the Christian witness shall be limited to prayer and righteous action...all Christian thinking, talking and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action...until the time that people will once again be able to speak the word of God with power, the Christian cause will be a quiet and hidden one.”<sup>19</sup>

Several weeks before another attempt of the resistance to overthrow the Nazi reign, Bonhoeffer wrote a Poem “*Success and Failure*” that anticipates the possibility of failure as well as success. Whatever it might be, it will be the steadfast love of God in Christ that transforms all failure. While expressed in poetic form, it is a prayer that ends with the truth of God’s love in Christ. “Time alone distinguishes when the incomprehensible, exciting, sudden event lapses into wearisome waiting, when the creeping hours of the day first reveal the true outlines of failure. Then most give up, weary of the monotony of oft-repeated failure, disappointed, and bored with themselves. That is the hour of steadfast love, the hour of the mother and the beloved, the hour of the friend and the brother. Steadfast love transforms all failure and gently cradles it in the soft radiance of heavenly light.”<sup>20</sup> In December Bonhoeffer wrote to Bethge that “I often wonder who I really am—the man who goes on squirming under these ghastly experiences in wretchedness that cries to leave, or the man who scourges himself and pretends to others (and even to himself) that he is placid, cheerful, composed, and in control of himself, and allows people to admire him

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<sup>18</sup> Bethge, *LPP*, Enlarged edition pages 139-143 includes a number of intercessory prayers, including hymn verses from Paul Gerhardt, Bonhoeffer wrote for fellow prisoners.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 279-280.

<sup>20</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Voices in the Night*. Translated by E. Robertson. . Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.199 35-37.

for it There is something more at stake than self-knowledge....I sometimes feel as if my life were more or less over.”<sup>21</sup>

The discovery of documents in late September, that implicated Bonhoeffer’s more direct involvement with the men associated with the attempt on Hitler’s life on July 20, 1944 included the transfer of Bonhoeffer from the Tegel prison to the SS prison in the Reich Central Security Quarters. His Bible was confiscated and he was permitted to write to his parents, his brother, Karl and Maria, his finance. On his last day (although he did not know that) in the Prinz-Albertstrasse prison before being transferred to Buchenwald, and then on to Flossenber, he had joined others in singing from Bach’s Cantata, “Eine feste Burg ist Unser Gott ”with the closing lines “And though the world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us. We will not fear for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.”<sup>22</sup>

A better-known writing from prison, is Bonhoeffer’s poem “*Who Am I*”. Written in the later days of his imprisonment but before his final transfers enroute to Flossenber it contains the inner struggle Bonhoeffer endured during his days in prison. While his fellow-prisoners, warders, visitors saw one who had mastered the limitations of life in prison, he “speaks like a squire from his country home....as though it were mine to command, bearing the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win...Or am I only what I myself know of myself? Struggling for breath...yearning for colours, for flowers...thirsting for words of kindness...powerlessly trembling for friends...weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making. Faint, and ready to say farewell to all. Who am I? This or the other? Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest O God, I am Thine”.<sup>23</sup>

On April 8,, 1945, the Second Sunday of Easter, in a small school house, Bonhoeffer had been asked to conduct a service for the small group which included a self-professed atheist. Reluctant to conduct a service, he agreed only when the atheist insisted. Reading the passage from the Moravian Brotherhood, Isaiah 53 “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” and I Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to

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<sup>21</sup> *Bonhoeffer*, LLP, p. 162.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in “*Strange Glory*”, Peter Marsh .Random House, New York. 2014. 388

<sup>23</sup> *Prisoner for God*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Macmillan Company, New York. 1954. 165.

his great mercy he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”.<sup>24</sup>

Monday morning, April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer and five others, including Admiral Canaris, head of the Abwehr and Hans Oster, its Deputy Chief, and three others were executed. Before stepping onto the platform, H. Fischer Hullstrung, the camp physician attested to the war crimes tribunal that he saw Bonhoeffer “bow to his knees and pray fervently to God.”<sup>25</sup>

It would be a misrepresentation of Bonhoeffer’s life and witness to conclude that “he believed in prayer”. It would be correct to say that Bonhoeffer’s practice and discipline of prayer, daily reading of Scripture and meditation were the means by which he stood before the Son of God made man, Jesus Christ, and standing beside Christ engaged in life in all its forms in this world and in the resurrection of Christ in the world to come.

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<sup>24</sup> *Strange Glory*, Marsh. 389

<sup>25</sup> *Strange Glory*, Marsh. 390