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Who is Christ for Us Today? Bonhoeffer's Final Questions | Charles Marsh

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The Veritas Forum

73 years after his death in a Nazi Concentration Camp, Dietrich Bonhoeffer remains a fascinating and influential icon. A man who embodied his theology in both his life and death, he earnestly wrestled with the questions of his time and what they meant for his Christian faith. At a Veritas Forum from Hope College, Charles Marsh (UVA) reads excerpts from his biography on Bonhoeffer as he attempts to make sense of the great Christian thinker and martyr.

Transcript

I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this Nazi hocus pocus sky high like fireworks. 73 years after his death in a Nazi Concentration Camp, Dietrich Bonhoeffer remains a fascinating and influential icon.

A man who embodied his theology in both his life and death, he earnestly wrestled with the questions of his time and what they meant for his Christian faith. At a Veritas Forum from Hope College, professor and author Charles Marsh reads excerpts from his biography on Bonhoeffer as he attempts to make sense of the great Christian thinker and martyr. I am so thrilled to be at Hope College.

I've heard such wonderful things about this college over the years. Two of the last three managers of this research project at the University of Virginia have been graduates of Hope. I've heard stories about how cool the college and town are and it's a delight to be here at last.

So thanks for your hospitality and for including me in this very distinguished lecture series. Many thanks to Grace and to Mark, to the president and provost, of course, I had the honor of meeting you a couple of years ago in Birmingham, Alabama. Thanks also to some wonderful person in CIT named Stephanie who I didn't see but please tell her that I love her dearly because around midnight as my computer was dying in my hotel room

and I realized to my horror that I left my AC adapter in Virginia she pulled a miracle and in fact let me borrow her own.

So somebody should also remind me to give that back to her tomorrow before I leave. A couple of points about what we're going to do together over the next hour. First of all I should say I take this lecture as just a great honor and I guess in some ways I can say I've been working on it for five years even though I only got the invitation an hour and a half ago.

On New Year's Eve at 1145 I emailed my editor a manuscript of the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that I'm writing for Kanop, a book called Strange Glory, a life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I promised my editor and my contract actually put a little enforcement in that to have a manuscript to him by the end of the calendar year 2013. So at a quarter of midnight on New Year's Eve I emailed him 880 pages and 220,000 words of a manuscript.

It's not the final manuscript but tonight I would like to read that in its entirety. I'm just kidding. I would like to do something that we could call the fierce urgency of Bonhoeffer's legacy in five acts.

I tell you how hard I've worked on this lecture so that if things like go to pieces in a half an hour you can at least say well he really tried hard he really worked hard on this. Join me please as we visit this extraordinary life and witness. So Act 1, Eternity's Child.

I finished this about 10 minutes ago. When he was a child, a young child, and his family rented a house near the Catholic cemetery in Breslow, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his twin sister Sabina lay awake at night trying to imagine eternity. Their ritual eventually became a game as each child concentrated on the word avikkite to clear the mind of distractions.

The first one asleep was to clear the loser. Dietrich and Sabina, blue-eyed twins with flowing blonde hair, cleave to each other as the sixth and seventh children of Dr. Kral and Paula Bonhoeffer. No time were fiercer than their nocturnal periginations when they pondered the mysteries of life beyond death from the bed they shared.

Dietrich almost always prevailed. On days when funerals were held at the Catholic church, the twins watched from their bedroom window as courteses and black draped horses drawing the hearse approached the cemetery that lay in the meadow opposite their home. Avikkite, Eternity, Sabina found the word very long and gruesome.

Dietrich found it majestic and ravishing and endlessly fascinating. He called it an awesome, awesome word. Sometimes he pictured himself on his deathbed in the company of family and friends, reclining on the threshold of heaven, rising to his final utterance.

He knew the lines he would speak. Sometimes he rehearsed them aloud to himself, though they had to be kept secret. He could not even tell Sabina.

Death impressed itself on Dietrich as an enthralling mystery, and sometimes the uncanny notion became an obsession. Abulations of awe, he might go to bed convinced that death would come that very night and transport him to Eternity's vast misterium. And some in such times he felt lightheaded.

Like the walls of the bedroom were reeling around like a carousel. The prospects of it happening now that this night he would vanish into Eternity felt then so real he had to bite his tongue and induce pain. He needed reassurance that he still resided among the living.

He wished to welcome death as an expected guest. He did not want to be taken by surprise. He was also convinced that he would die young.

In the grip of these fierce fascinations, Dietrich worried that he suffered from an incurable disease. This was no ordinary illness and had no ordinary remedy. It was certainly not the kind of disease that his father, the noted neurologist and psychiatrist, treated.

Sometimes it took the form of a waking nightmare. He imagined himself rushing from sister to brother, from parent to expert, pleading for help. Who could save him from this strange condition? After Dietrich and Sabina moved into separate bedrooms, the twins devised a code for keeping their nightly metaphysical routine.

Dietrich drummed his fingers lightly against the wall in his admonitory knock. This is what he called it. Announcing that the time had come to turn their minds heavenward, each knock that followed signaled a ponderous thought.

And the metaphysical exercise continued. But Dietrich usually discerned the final silence. Then the game ended and he lay awake in the silent room.

The only light came from a pair of crosses that his mother had placed atop a corner table. The crosses, illuminated by candles whose light shielded him from darkness, were meant to bring comfort. And they usually did, though the shadows flickering against the walls took strange forms.

When at night I go to bed, 14 angels round my stead, Paula Bonhoeffer sang reassuringly. Bonhoeffer liked the idea very much. He loved the idea of angels, dressed in a little white cloak, standing by his bed at night, watching over him and children everywhere, bringing comfort, keeping them safe.

The nightly ritual spared Dietrich the fate of being devoured by Satan. Sabina, the twin, later recalled. Although, and perhaps for this reason, there are strikingly few references

to Satan in his writings early or late.

Growing up in a humanistic family had steered Bonhoeffer clear of churchly lessons on damnation and hell. And he carried none of the weight of the tormented pilgrim. Death enthralled more than it frightened.

And the devil frightened him, not at all. God does not want human beings to be afraid, he would later say, in a sermon preached and in a fluent London suburb. And grace.

Act 2. Italy is simply irresistible. That's Italy. Bonhoeffer hatched his plan to visit Italy as he lay in bed recovering from a concussion.

He had slipped while ice skating with friends on his 18th birthday. He now lived in Fraule Yeager's boarding house in the University town of Tübingen, in one of the newer neighborhoods near the train station. Though confined to his rooms, he appeared in good spirits when his parents arrived from Berlin, bearing gifts of writing paper, tobacco, books, chocolate, and an envelope of 50 Reichsmarks to buy anything he wanted.

It was nice having his parents at his side, and the large window of the boarding house at 10 Ullmstrasse offered a large window with views of the Rhine River in the distance. As far as the 50 Reichsmark, Lanya, Bonhoeffer had his sights. So then the classical guitar he had seen in the Franciscan of Fertile, the French Quarter of the town, still.

There was another infinitely better gift he had been intending to ask his parents about, even better than the fine instrument with the wonderful tone. He wanted to spend the summer in Italy. Spending the summer in Italy, he said, "would be the most fabulous thing that could happen to me.

Going to Italy would be so fabulous. I can't even begin to imagine how fabulous it would be." His parents, who had made the grand tour themselves on numerous occasions, said yes and kindly set aside a generous sum to cover their son's travels. On Palm Sunday, 1924, Dietrich Rose Early thrilled and expectant and hurried to make the morning mass at St. Peter's Cathedral.

He stood next to a woman in the back who invited him to follow along in her Latin mass. "The service was infused completely," he said, "with the expectation of the passion, the reading of the liturgy and soft musical cadences, the confession of the creeds, the invocation of the Holy Spirit. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, the tender and melodious sounds of the people.

The music and spoken word enveloped the vast enclosures beneath the light-filled vault, and Bonhoeffer propelled excited by this veritable feast of rich ecclesial offerings, was seized suddenly by the notion which he wrote down in his daybook, "The universality of the church." The benediction left him wanting more, so after lunch he walked to the quiescence of the Jesu, the magnificent church near the Palazzo Atterio, which housed the

crypt of St. Ignacius of Loyola. Bonhoeffer marveled at the multitude of white-robed Jesuits, shimmering like a sea of flowers as they read passages from lamentations. Large families waited their turn at the confessionals, illuminated by slowly-darkening altar candles.

Bonhoeffer, a freshman theology student back in Germany, marveled at it all. Then to Vespers, at Trinidad de Monti, where 40 girls in a solemn procession wearing nuns' habits with blue or green sashes to vowels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The girl sang even song, Bonhoeffer wrote, with unbelievable simplicity, grace, and great seriousness.

Every trace of routine was missing, and the whole thing gave me an unparalleled impression of profound, sincere piety. It was worship in the true sense. After Vespers, standing outside on the terrace above the Spanish steps, Bonhoeffer savored the most magnificent view of the eternal city, the sky bathed and the red light of the sunset.

On Good Friday, he was back at St. Peter's, among the first to arrive for the early service, where another ecclesial feast had been abundantly prepared. The malefuous gospel reading, the magnificent singing and choral response, the extraordinary festive adoration of the cross before which the priest knelt, kissing the cross, adorning it. It was exciting now for Bonhoeffer to follow the mass in his own missile, the gift of a Catholic seminarian he had met by the name of Plata Platinus.

Bonhoeffer noted excitedly in his daybook, the Christus factus, the Benedictus from St. Luke's gospel, and once again the missary, the beautiful penitential prayer in Psalm 51, "Lord have mercy upon us." Bonhoeffer registered not a hint of Protestant discomfort when a doughy-faced castrati ascended from the choir and sang three solos for the alto. In fact, the effect was quite the opposite. The unique song Bonhoeffer said, while thoroughly inhuman, produced a peculiar, rapturous ecstasy, Bonhoeffer held his missile close to him, delighted in its strange glories.

For the most part, the text are wonderfully poetic and lucid. He wrote, "Everything flows from the main theme of the mass, the sacrificial death, and its continual reenactment in the sacrificial mass of communion." Later, that same evening, Bonhoeffer engaged in a rare theological debate. Amidst the exhilarating pageantry of Holy Week, he had had little time, our interest, in arguing about doctrine.

And now he served up only a few fleeting defenses of his evangelical faith, and it was only by the prodding of Plata Platinus that Bonhoeffer briefly turned his attention away from the magnificent and worshipful Roman frolic to formulate a Protestant notion, R2. Plata Platinus told Bonhoeffer that "modern Catholicism remained fundamentally the same as early Christianity, and that the creeds and councils of the Magisterium clarified and made intelligent the essence of the faith." Bonhoeffer took Plata Platinus' bait, and the two students debated the point as they traversed the crowded city streets.

Bonhoeffer countered with the prospect that Catholicism falsified the original and turned the effervescence of Christianity into static dogma.

Protestantism enabled the symbolic and doctrinal encrustations of Christianity to fall away, which was a more honest approach. But that was as far as the conversation went. Bonhoeffer had nothing more to say.

He was too busy trying to make the next Roman Mass and the churches that Martin Luther had centuries earlier called the synagogues of Satan. The 17-year-old Berlin prodigy journeyed through Rome in a state of perpetual bliss. America, 1930, 31 Act III.

At the end of the fall semester, as the end of the fall semester grew near and advent approached, Bonhoeffer found it surprisingly difficult to get into the spirit of the season. He had never spent Christmas apart from his family. Memories of family happiness and all the gatherings and festivities that his mother planned with such great grand-grandfare left him in a downhearted mood.

But homesickness did not account for the sum of his feelings. He wrote to a friend back in Germany to say that his hope of finding in America a cloud of witnesses had been utterly disappointed. He had written in a journal that he hoped in this year as a student abroad to find a greater cloud of witnesses, some kind of a concrete embodiment of Christ and community that he had tasted and glimpsed in Rome but never really experienced in the melancholy of the North Protestant German plains.

One feels like one is standing on an observation tower looking out over the whole world, and no matter where one looks, most of what one sees is infinitely depressing. The frivolous attitudes of the mainline churches in America had proved vexing from the start, but now Bonhoeffer took the holiness of Protestant liberalism as a kind of mirror into his own soul. Monday morning editions of The New York Times with their page three summaries of sermons preached the previous day read to him like dispatches from a spiritual wasteland.

With headlines conveying a Protestant ethos desperately seeking relevance. Jesus is better without the creeds. The five pillars of a healthy personality, pastor urges strong values in the home.

Bonhoeffer read these titles and wrote to a friend, "In New York they preach about virtually everything except Jesus." So thank God Christmas is coming. Otherwise I would fall completely into despair, and he was still three months away from another good Friday service, 1931. When he ambled into the sanctuary of St. Mark's in the Bowery for a service that featured the hipster priest William Norman Guthrie unpacking the seven last words of Christ and a recitation inspired by Ezra Pound's cantos.

This gave parishioners Guthrie the pastor claimed a more convincing revelation of the

heroic son of man, having once been temporarily relieved of his ecclesial administration after staging a church dance to an Egyptian sun god. Parson Guthrie took the occasion of good Friday to reject the cross of Christ. I don't want that kind of God.

I deny the reconciliation of the cross, and instead he treated his flock to a smorgasbord of syncretistic samplings, a Brahmin priest performing Hindu prayers, a chanting Mohawk Indian in full body paint, a Zoroastrian holy man laboring over a fire ceremony, and a barefoot dance troupe from Barnard College improvising an enunciation day sketch. Array of Light came the next week when Bonhoeffer, with a little money and a tent and a quartet of unlikely companions sputtered out of New York City in a third hand Oldsmobile, May 5, 1931. Spring was now in full bloom, and an hour outside the city, the open road cut through the rolling hills of Essex County, shimmering with the early wildflowers.

Bonhoeffer sat behind the wheel with flanked by a Swiss fella, a Frenchman, and an American Paul Lehman who would go as far as Chicago. Roadway options were limited in 1931, but even with only a smattering of postcards as clues to their route, the men likely caught Highway 22 West in Newark and then drove through Redding, Harrisonburg, Altona, and Pittsburgh. In a postcard marked Portland, a hamlet in the heart of the slate belt.

Bonhoeffer wrote, "After driving the first 100 miles in three hours with very little traffic, we have arrived in the mountains of Pennsylvania. We're eating lunch and enjoying the beautiful surroundings and this beautiful warm weather. From there, Highway 30 cut west, the straightest route to Akron, Fort Wayne, Gary, and Chicago, and then it was the long, lonesome highway 51 south through Springfield, St. Louis, Memphis, Jackson, Hammond, all the way to New Orleans with only Bonhoeffer and LeCer, the Frenchman, holding proper driver's license and able to sit behind the wheel.

Bonhoeffer successfully navigated the streets of the Crescent City, deposited the Swiss fellow off at the harbor where he had made arrangements to take a ship back to New York City and now the quartet had become a fellowship of two. Fast distances still lay ahead. A color postcard of a long horn bull on May 16th informed his grandmother, Julie, that the hill country of south central Texas called to mind the mountains of the eastern herits where the Bonhoeffer family had a beautiful country home.

It was fresh, untouched, beautiful, beautiful country. On May 17th, Bonhoeffer wrote from the border town of Laredo to say that he had never felt anything like the soupy furnace of south Texas heat, where the temperatures had already swelled into the mid 90s and only half past May. But everything was going great.

The car ran smoothly over well-built roads and after sunset the huge prairie sky glowed like candles for nearly an hour. And there at the border, Bonhoeffer and LeCer hopped on the train from Mexico City. And for a week they explored the mysteries of Mexico's

strange intermediate culture with its Spanish Catholic and native Indian elements to curiously and provocatively combined.

At the invitation of a Quaker friend of LeCler's, the two Europeans, Dietrich and John, shared their observations of the new world at a gathering in Mexico. And it pleased LeCler to hear Dietrich speak of his new understanding of the Sermon on the mountain and Jesus' commandments on peace. The example of peace it seems had been the example of Christ it seems had been discussed over long hours on the road and under night skies at campsites.

Pepper throughout LeCler's disputations were such extraordinary astonishing ideas as the seductions and treacheries of the war god Mars. The subversive power of Christ's non-violent weakness, the limits of obedience to the nation, Bonhoeffer had mounted strong counter arguments from the German war tradition in the southern latitudes Bonhoeffer was beginning to learn the language of peace. The two men drove twelve fourteen sixteen hour days interrupted only by clumsy attempts to cook meat over campfires.

Frantic and often futile searches for a motel room when in need of hot shower and a bed and occasional misadventures of roughing it in the wild. On the return trip to New York, the two men retraced their steps to New Orleans but then took a different road the rest of the way home following highway twenty into the heart of the Jim Crow south. Crossing the border into Mississippi the road brought them through Hattiesburg, Laurel, Meridian, Demopolis, Tuscaloosa.

In Birmingham they moved on to highway eleven towards Knoxville passing the exit to the north alababentown of Scottsboro. The same month nine young black men were accused of raping two white women on a freight train and in a terrible miscarriage of justice were convicted in the mob atmosphere and successive trials. Then under Roanoke, Stanton, Harrisonburg, through Hagerstown, West Virginia, Harrisburg, PA, on to highway twenty-two east to Reading and Newark and finally back to New York City.

Four thousand miles in seven weeks in a car, another twelve hundred on Mexican trains. Although Bonhoeffer kept no journal on the trip, he was driving the entire time or most of the time. It seems likely he made notes along the way.

In any case, impressions of the journey through the south built around studied observations of race relations appeared in his final report on that exchange year in the summer of 1931 with arresting power sometimes. Tense phrases evoke the ordeals of Jim Crow, blood laws, mob rules, sterilizations, land seizures, a world darker than a thousand midnights. Bonhoeffer had observed incidents of racism in New York City.

Once while waiting for a table at a Manhattan diner, he and a black friend, Frank Fisher, had been rudely shoot off by the owner. But Bonhoeffer wrote, "The way the southerners talk about the Negroes is simply repugnant, and the pastors, they're no better than the

others." The report reveals too that on the Sunday morning in May, with visceral and unforgettable effect, Bonhoeffer stopped somewhere east of New Orleans and south of Knoxville and worshipped in a black rural church. Charged, he wrote with an enormous intensity of feeling and embraced by outcries and interrupting shouts.

He said he heard the gospel preached with conviction and power for the first time in the United States in the black churches. Here, one really could hear someone talk about sin and grace and love and ultimate hope. And beyond the preaching, he felt church deep in his bones and the spirituals in the strange mixture of reserved melancholy in the eruptive joy of Negro worship.

It was as if these black Christians through enormous intensity and feeling had tapped into the source of the romantic longing for sublimity. But out of the great spiritual genius had earthed emotion, intensity and feeling in the sorrowful joy of Jesus of Nazareth. Bonhoeffer said he awakened to fresh spiritual energies in the American church of the outcast.

The Baptist in me just wants to say amen at that point. Thank you. What we shall need is a new monasticism act for.

In the letter to his older brother, Carl Friedrich in the spring of 1935, Bonhoeffer tried to explain to this brother he admired a brilliant physicist, a human rights champion and an atheist, why he followed Jesus Christ. Like Friedrich, Carl Friedrich opposed the Nazis and he championed it that year. Human rights causes with a kind of ferocity that his younger brother did not even share.

But he did not share Dietrich's convictions or understand his decision to become a theologian and pastor. When he first heard Bonhoeffer say this, years earlier he promptly announced, "You will be living your life in full intellectual retreat from everything important." Bonhoeffer told his brother, "Perhaps I seem to you rather fanatical. I myself am sometimes afraid of that.

But I know that the day I become more reasonable, to be honest, I should have to chuck so much of my theology." You see, when I first started in theology, my idea of it was quite different. It was rather more academic. But now it's turned into something else altogether.

And I do believe that at last I'm on the right track for the first time in my life. I often feel so happy about it. I only worry about being so afraid of what other people would think as to get bogged down instead of going forward.

But I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this Nazi hocus-pocus sky high like fireworks, leaving only a few burnt-out

shells behind. But you know, the restoration of the church must surely depend on something different, on a new kind of monasticism, which has little in common with the old, but is a life of uncompromising discipleship.

I believe the time has come to gather people together and to do this. A few months later, Bonhoeffer arrived at a wind-swept town on the Baltic Sea to incarnate his experiment in new monasticism. He had spent holidays near the Baltic with his family and later as a college student trekked with classmates through Lübeck, Timondorf, Plun, and the trails of Dittmarshan where the land was flat and verdant.

But warm days are rarity on Europeans northern coast. As you know, if you've been there and a clear June morning can suddenly turn to grace-hoots of rain and bracing winds. And by summers in the huts that formed the community, worn by the sun, became uninhabitable.

So Bonhoeffer jumped when a former estate in the Pomerania region became available, 30 well-tended acres of land with classrooms and reliable heating. And there in the town of Finkenvalda, now Poland and Poland, the first session of the Preacher Seminary in Finkenvalda began on August 26, 1935. This is the subject of his book, Life Together.

For the students who had never heard Bonhoeffer lecture and even for many who had known him at Berlin University, the classes were unlike anything they had ever encountered. Students soon realized they were not there simply to learn new techniques of preaching and instruction but were initiates into a new manner of being a Christian. Descent resistance, these must be nourished by spiritual sources, prayer, Bible study, concentration on the essential matters, expanded the moral imagination.

On a more personal level, Bonhoeffer's insatiable hunger for intimate brotherhood had brought him to this beautiful trace of land and upper Pomerania and community for these two years became his artwork, beauty and discipline forming a perfect circle. Still, Bonhoeffer may be the only monk ever described by his brothers as a dappydresser. The seminarians first afternoon together had been a festive affair.

The day was bright and clear and the promise of a new semester excited the conversations. As students gathered on the lawn for an opening day reception, a young country boy, son of a pastor named Abahard Beikah asked one of his new classmates when Pastor Bonhoeffer was expected to arrive. The student smiled and nodded in the direction of a tan, blonde-haired fellow in a white suit.

That's Bonhoeffer, the dappydresser. Bonhoeffer at age 29 was only three years older than Abahard but he looked younger. Abahard introduced himself to Dietrich and the two men spoke briefly, sipping white wine on the summer lawn.

Within a few weeks they had become inseparable. Bonhoeffer would soon refer to

Abahard as my daring trusting spirit. While Bonhoeffer and other friends might spend time together discussing theological matters, politics, the church struggle, the Kirchenkampf, things were different with Abahard.

With Abahard, he entered into a friendship unlike any he had ever known. In an autobiographical novel that remained unfinished, Bonhoeffer described the comradeship of two men Christoph and Ulrich, two men who had come to know each other down to the most minute detail of their behavior, opinions, and innate characteristics. Two men who as two persons had grown together into an intimate union.

Some seminarians wondered whether Bonhoeffer had fallen in love with this young country pastor with a boy or smile. In fact, Bonhoeffer's affection for Bekah would at times become a source of resentment among the brethren. Bekah some complain had become the alshkoshbroken of Lieblingda chefs, the chefs clear favorite, his dear one.

Sensitivity to these feelings was perhaps one reason Bonhoeffer insisted that no one was to speak about a fellow ordnance in his absence, or if this should happen, to tell him about it afterwards. In the music room of the rambling estate that housed this illegal seminary of the confessing church, this experiment in new monasticism, Bonhoeffer played piano while Abahard sang in a delicate tenor. Dietrich taught Abahard, a son of the mants, to love chappen and brahm's, Abahard inspired Bonhoeffer, a child of the buildings' burger tomb, the educated a permittal class, to an appreciation of choral music of the reformation.

At the end of the first session Bonhoeffer told his family that this time had been without a doubt the most joyful period of his life. But it had not been easy this experiment in new monasticism, or for that matter successful, at least from the perspective of the other members of the community. Equipped with little personal experience of a setical living, Bonhoeffer's plan for raising up a generation of radical Christians formed by the pure gospel produced fairly dismal results in the early going.

Besides the Everloyl Abahard, few seminarians found the strict liturgical ordering of their day to their liking. There was too much must for us, one student complained. Gerhard Abling, a think involved a student who later became a theologian, complained of the oppressively jesuitical air of the school.

Others expressed frustration and disappointment. They had come in search of knowledge and answers, but all they had received was for their efforts was a sense of emptiness and failure in themselves and in their reading of scripture. Take for example one Gordon said to Bonhoeffer, "The morning period of quiet meditation, which Bonhoeffer required, it seemed interminable.

Protestants are supposed to be people of the word okay, but a full half hour of silent meditation is torture. The mind moves around, memories flicker into consciousness,

dreams awaken, anglers flare up. Bonhoeffer listened to the criticisms and he made a few repairs.

On the problem of drifting thoughts, he invited the pastors in training to accept distraction and these distractions is a natural part of the devotional life, not to fret, not to fall into the paralyzing trap of hyper self-monitoring, distractions, reverie, daydreaming. Fold them into your prayer. Don't try to fight them off, that's a losing battle anyway.

Everything's going to come out in the open eventually. Bonhoeffer not only allowed a logistical change, welcoming these open discussions in his exercise in human asthicism, he also told the men that they would no longer be expected to meditate alone. They could form contemplative pairs, our clusters, and share solitude.

The discipline of silence, however, Bonhoeffer emphasized, must be learned, it must be practiced, even if in pairs are in clusters, because teaching about Christ always begins in silence. Christian thinking and acting emerged from encounter with Jesus in stillness before the word. Yes, there is a silence we must learn, and this is the silence that brings clarification, purification, and concentration upon the essential thing.

Holy silence is the heart's hidden center, a concentrated attention to joy and freshness that awakens and makes strange once again the mysteries of the word. So final act, act five, the final feast, and the next cell a prisoner wept aloud. Early the next morning a slot in the door scratched open and a tiny portion of bread appeared on a template.

The prison staff addressed Bonhoeffer and the men, a scoundrel scum, traitors, shrine. It was six months before Bonhoeffer received any warrant for his arrest. Sometime toward the end of the first week he was moved to an isolation cell on the top floor of the Gestapo prison.

He was not allowed books, newspapers, and tobacco are to write letters. Bonhoeffer remained in solitary confinement for the next 12 days, shackled hand and foot. The cell door opened only to bring food or remove the latrine bucket.

Otherwise the prison staff made him invisible, refusing to answer questions or reciprocate. In the spoken word, he wasn't permitted the regular half hour of free time in the prison yard. He lay in his cot unable to sleep.

And of course at night, night times carried the muffled sob of men broken by the long periods of solitary confinement. Prison is the habitation of every dismal sound Bonhoeffer had marked long ago in this warm copy of Don Quixote. This was his new congregation.

During the two years that separate his arrest and his death, Bonhoeffer took stock of his life and all its variety and letters, palms, prayers, drafts of short stories, unfinished

novels, plays, and outlines of future books and essays and aphorisms and exegesis and music sketches and sketches on various other themes. The letters and papers from prison are fragments of a great unburdening, howls against San Guinh hopes. Bonhoeffer resisted the notion that he suffered in prison to suggest that he was suffering as some friends did, felt like a profanation to him.

He shared his private fears eventually and correspondence with Abahard. He said the first week's had been wretched, sure. Still it would be a perverse indulgence to say that he suffered, and he had no anchoring after martyrdom.

These things must not be dramatized, he cautioned. A great deal is horrible here. Yeah, but where is it otherwise? The Jews suffered.

The families of the fallen brethren suffered. The mental incompetence murdered by killing squads had suffered. His anxious parents suffered.

Now, suffering must be something quite different. It must have a different dimension from what I have so far experienced. On his wall of a cell, he hung a reproduction of Duro's apocalypse, a rendering of Revelation 12.7, the battle between good and evil, and Saint Michael leading the angels against the dragon.

Bonhoeffer placed a bouquet of prim roses on a table made of cast iron. In prison, he forged new directions of thought like an artist making repeated brush strokes on a densely layered canvas, and he returned to many of his first loves. He recalled his student years and his convivial exchanges with professors Harnack and Hall.

His feelings for the vanished ideals of German humanism grew tender and nostalgic. A decade had passed since he had been a full-time member of the university. One of his last seminars in the summer of 1933 had been a line-by-line reading of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of religion.

He found nourishment in the great scholarly tradition of the 19th century, which had earlier produced profound heaviness. Protective boundaries collapsed gently in these months, in a greater awakening to what he called the polyphony of life. He spoke of loss and letting go of academic careers left unfulfilled, of engagements left pending letters unfinished.

He might easily have joined ranks with those who were torn into fragments by events and by questions. Instead, he opened himself to the incompleteness of things, accepted the upheavals and intrusions with a disarming gratefulness. God was the great story that unfolded all of fragmented reality into an everlasting song.

God so loved the world that he gave. And Bonhoeffer said, "That which is fragmentary may even point to a higher fulfillment which can no longer be achieved by human effort." Filled with gratitude for a wholeness he had once known, Bonhoeffer turned to

the small and sometimes broken things, not resolutely but compassionately. A stanza that I came across from storm resonates with this mood and echoes over and over in my consciousness like a melody I can't get out of my mind.

If outside it's all gone mad and Christian ways are not still as the world, this gorgeous world entirely resilient. A few colorful fall flowers outside the cell window, a half-hours exercise in the prison yard at last, the site of a beautiful linden tree, minor glories suffice to confirm the whole. In the end he said, "The world is summed up in a few people one wants to see and with whom one wishes to be together." In prison, Bonhoeffer sang a song of earthly love.

No transcendent hiddenness or gazing into the endless distance. He said he did not share Diogeny's opinion that the absence of desire is the highest joy and an empty barrel, the ideal vessel. The song of Solomon, Bonhoeffer discovered to his infinite delight the Hebrew Bible's love song, "Tessential Love," consecrated the flesh in all the right places.

"You really can't imagine a hotter, more sensual, and more glowing love than the one spoken of here," he wrote. Bonhoeffer questioned the judgment of anyone who would say that the restraint of passion captured the disciples' prerogative. "Where is there such restraint in the Old Testament?" he wrote.

Israel is delivered out of Egypt so that it may live before God as God's people on earth and all their sinfulness. Shut inside a Gestapo prison, there was a little more Bonhoeffer could do for the Jews of Europe now than to honor the story of Israel as a lesson to the Christian church. Bonhoeffer was a man formed in single-minded discipleship to Jesus who realized that precisely for this reason, thinking about God would forever wander into abstraction and idolatry if it were not anchored in the history, suffering, and religion of the Jews.

In October 1944, Bonhoeffer had been transferred from Tegel Prison to the brutal Gestapo, Nazi prison at Prinz-Albert-Strasse. The city of Berlin lay in ruins and smoke-filled the city. Whole streets had disappeared under piles of cascading rubble and broken water lines created vast sheets of black ice.

He penned a prelude to eternity, a poem of Angoutenmechten, an epistolary last statement with an embedded poetic jewel wrote Bonhoeffer's translator by all good powers. But still, it's a poem that breathes mortal longings, those surrounded by faithful, quiet powers of good, so wondrously consoled and sheltered here in the prison cell how fine it would be still to enter the new year with family and friends to the joys of this world and its glorious son. If it is possible, do reunite us, he says.

But Bonhoeffer understands the situation. He has been condemned to die as a traitor. And memory gives way in the poem to expectation.

And the voices of the past fade to the deepest quiet. He no longer hears them. But against the narrowing horizon of death, on the threshold of time and eternity, he begins to hear a new song.

Oh, let our ears now that full of sound amaze of this, your world, God, invisibly expanding as all your children seeing high hymns of praise. How could this feel? What could this be? This past becoming present once again, pure, free and whole, becoming your life's enduring part. And in that expanding chorus, the past returned as a source of comfort, the woodland scenes and the quiet glades from his country home in Friedrich's Broome, the stars glistening and the pomeranian sky, breezes purring for the Linden Forest, the enchanting days of early autumn, the absence of sermons and family and choral song, however, no longer filled him with longing and sadness.

The wind bears fragments of hymns to me. In the hell of the Gassapo interrogation prison, Bonhoeffer was graced with the visitation of angels. And the great invisible realm had become visible.

And there was no longer any doubt about his existence. Everywhere resounded in this new song, the yes and the amen. Two weeks later, in a letter to his parents, handwritten in pencil, he turned to the matter of his personal effects.

What she did with his wardrobe. He asked his mother to give it away as a people's offering. His dinner jacket, his felt hats, his salt and pepper suit, which was too small anyway, you know that his pair of brown loafers, his fur, he was confident his dear mama would have a better idea by now than he of what he still owned.

In short, give it all away, whatever, anyone might need without giving in a second thought. The famous last words attributed to Bonhoeffer, spoken in the hour of his death, "This is not the end for me. It is the beginning of a life." Came from a report written later by a British intelligence officer after the war.

Bonhoeffer's last written words, I think, offer a more fitting tribute to this theologian and pastor. Mom, please drop off some stationary with the commissar. Thanks.

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[Music]