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Bonhoeffer and the Psalms

By Carson Reed

Notable among those who profess Christian faith in the twentieth century is the German minister and scholar, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His work and ministry, culminating in an ill-fated attempt to assassinate Hitler in the war-torn years of World War II, bear the marks of Christianity lived and practiced, even at the price of personal preference and safety. Of enduring value to contemporary faith is Bonhoeffer's view of Christianity in an increasingly secular and hostile world. Bonhoeffer called the church to recognize the radical and sweeping changes that were necessary in order for the church to effectively serve her mission.

The purpose of this essay is to introduce one foundational source of spirituality for Bonhoeffer: the Psalms. Though a part of the Old Testament canon, the Psalms were regarded by Bonhoeffer as having great significance in the Christian's life. Consistent with his Lutheran tradition, Bonhoeffer approached scripture from a christological point of view: the Old Testament bears witness to Christ. Moreover, Christ is *present* in the Old Testament as well as the New.¹ Thus, the Christian should "not ask first what [the Psalms] have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus Christ."²

With Christ at the center of his interpretation, Bonhoeffer goes to the Psalms with a perspective that offers important insights. Among the last materials published before Bonhoeffer's arrest was a pamphlet entitled **Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible**.³ Written in a simple and straightforward

style, **Psalms** is Bonhoeffer's attempt to place this rich prayer resource on the table of the twentieth-century church. He begins by noting the unique nature of the Psalms. Comprised of prayers, the book of Psalms is the only document in Scripture that is primarily discourse directed to God. Elsewhere in Scripture, the direction of the text is toward humanity: God speaking to his people. In the Psalms, God has given prayers by which the church may express itself to him. But how can human prayers, the words of men, be the Word of God? Bonhoeffer suggests that through Jesus, the varied expressions of human experience recorded in the Psalms become the Word of God. If the Psalms look toward Jesus and his experience, then Jesus, as God incarnate, makes the words his own. The Christian adds his voice to that of Jesus when the Psalms are used for prayer.

It is the incarnate Son of God, who has borne every human weakness in his own flesh, who here pours out the heart of all humanity before God and who stands in our place and prays for us. He has known torment and pain, guilt and death more deeply than we. Therefore it is the prayer of the human nature assumed by him which comes here before God. It is really our prayer, but since he knows us better than we know ourselves and since he himself was true man for our sakes, it is also really his prayer, and it can become our prayer only because it was his prayer.⁴

According to Bonhoeffer, such prayer must be an integral part of the Christian life. In a work released in 1939 called **Life Together**, he explores the use of the Psalms in worship and devotions.⁵ The focus of the book is fellowship in the Christian community. Built on the foundation of God's work through Jesus Christ, fellowship is nurtured and sustained through the classic exercises of prayer, song, Scripture, and communion. In the area of prayer, the Psalter plays a vital part. Citing the historic role that the Psalms played as the ancient hymnbook of Israel, Bonhoeffer seeks to re-establish their use within his particular church tradition. He suggests that the Psalms are a "school of prayer," and can teach the church at least three distinct things.⁶

First, the Psalms show what prayer means. For Bonhoeffer, prayer is a manifestation of our reliance in the word of God. By praying the prayer of the Psalms, the church places trust in the God-given structure and content of the Psalter. God is a God of promises, and believers--with Christ himself praying with and through us--find confidence to speak in the Psalms.

Second, the Psalms teach the church what to pray. The full range of human experience is present in the Psalms. The community finds voice to articulate the breadth of human emotions--from gratitude and joy to suffering, pain, and deepest passion--within the context of faith. Even the imprecatory psalms, with their vows of vengeance and bloodshed, find harmonic overtones in the church's life when engaged from the point of view of Jesus Christ.

Third, the Psalms teach the church how to pray as a fellowship. Bonhoeffer's words express this concept with grace and power:

[Through the Psalms] the body of Christ is praying, and as an individual one acknowledges that his prayer is only a minute fragment of the whole prayer of the Church. He learns to pray the prayer of the Body of Christ. And that lifts him above his personal concerns and allows him to pray selflessly.⁷

In the Psalms no one prays alone. Rather, the individual joins with the collective voice of the church and with Christ in praying to the Father.

Bonhoeffer's life and teaching demonstrate this threefold movement of the Psalter. As the director of the Finkenwalde seminary he engaged in distinct exploration of spirituality through the classical disciplines. Though foreign to his own rationalist education and Lutheran tradition, Bonhoeffer pressed his students to survey the terrain of communal life, confession, songs, meditation, and the use of the

Psalter in worship. Perhaps due to his exposure to the Anglican tradition while a minister in Britain, Bonhoeffer saw this emphasis on spirituality an important corrective in his own tradition. Fortunately, a number of his meditations on the Psalms are available in English in the little work, **Meditation on the Word**. Throughout these meditations the clear invitation to engage the heart of God reveals itself:

In the commandments, in acts of worship and prayers, the heart seeks after the One who has given them all. So it is not inactive and does not rest content, but continuously seeks God and his revelation--the Word in the words, the Gospel in the law. Blessed is the person who keeps the testimonies of God in this way, who seeks God from her whole heart.⁸

Bonhoeffer's personal experience forced him to grapple with his own identity and his relationship with God. From 1939, he participated in the resistance to the Nazi regime and eventually, in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Such a path opened up grave ethical choices and personal dilemmas. But beneath his struggle was a profound rootedness in spirituality. Even during his last days, spent in the prisons of the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer found himself sustained by the classic disciplines of worship, prayer, journaling, and service.⁹ His spirituality rested on the deep and nurturing resource of Scripture in general, and the Psalms in particular. As Bonhoeffer said, "[t]he more deeply we grow into the psalms and the more often we pray them as our own, the more simple and rich will our prayer become."¹⁰

Postscript

Payne Best, a British officer who was held at Flossenburg with Bonhoeffer during the last few days of Bonhoeffer's life, writes:

Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive...He was one of the very few men that I have ever met to whom his God was real and close...¹¹

The following poem, written by Bonhoeffer while in prison, reflects both the deep human struggle and the spiritual sensitivity that characterized his life.

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Who Am I?

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of
birds,

thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty
humiliation,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite
distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

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

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About Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Eberhard Bethge, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage** (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1970).

John D. Glodsey, **The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer** (London: SCM Press LTD, 1960).

Larry Rasmussen with Renate Bethge, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer: His Significance for North Americans** (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

Martin Kuske, translated by S.T. Kimbrough, Jr., **The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer's Interpretation** (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976).

Notes

¹For a detailed review of Bonhoeffer and the Old Testament see Martin Kuske, **The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer's Interpretation** (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, **Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible** (Augsburg, 1970) 14.

³Original published in 1940. In English, the book was

published by Augsburg in 1970.

⁴Bonhoeffer, **Psalms**, 20-21.

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, **Life Together** (New York: Harper & Row, 1954); additional resource can be found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, **Meditation on the Word** (Cowley, 1986).

⁶The following material is from Bonhoeffer, **Life Together**, 47-49.

⁷Ibid, 49.

⁸Bonhoeffer, **Meditation on the Word**, 113.

⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, **Letters and Papers from Prison** (New York: Macmillan, 1972). Much has been said about Bonhoeffer and religionless Christianity; however, Bonhoeffer in no way relinquishes the value of prayer and spirituality in his move toward a Christianity that is devoid of "religion." See Eberhard Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Non-Religious Interpretation of the Christian Gospel" (Union Theological Seminary, Reigner Recording Library), audio cassette.

¹⁰Bonhoeffer, **Life Together**, 50.

¹¹Payne Best, as quoted by Eberhard Bethge in "A Biographical Sketch," **Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible**, 83.

¹²Bonhoeffer, **Letters and Papers from Prison**, 347-48.