

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

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*God Is in  
the Manger*

Reflections on Advent  
and Christmas

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## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE



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

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

O. C. Dean Jr.

## EDITOR'S PREFACE



This devotional brings together daily reflections from one of the twentieth century's most beloved theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). These reflections have been chosen especially for the seasons of Advent and Christmas, a time when the liturgical calendar highlights several themes of Bonhoeffer's beliefs and teachings: that Christ expresses strength best through weakness, that faith is more important than the beguiling trappings of religion, and that God is often heard most clearly by those in poverty and distress.<sup>1</sup>

Although he came from a well-to-do family, by the time he wrote most of the content in this book, Bonhoeffer was well acquainted with both poverty and distress. Just two days after Adolf Hitler had seized control of Germany in early 1933, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio sermon in which he criticized the new regime and warned Germans that "the Führer concept" was dangerous and wrong. "Leaders of offices which set themselves up as gods mock God," his address concluded. But Germany never got to hear those final statements, because Bonhoeffer's microphone had been switched off mid-transmission.<sup>2</sup> This began a twelve-year struggle against Nazism in Germany, with Bonhoeffer running afoul of authorities and being arrested in 1943. Much of the content of

this book was written during the two years he spent in prison.

For Bonhoeffer, waiting—one of the central themes of the Advent experience—was a fact of life during the war: waiting to be released from prison; waiting to be able to spend more than an hour a month in the company of his young fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer; waiting for the end of the war. In his absence, friends and former students were killed in battle and his parents' home was bombed; there was little he could do about any of this except pray and wield a powerful pen. There was a helplessness in his situation that he recognized as a parallel to Advent, Christians' time of waiting for redemption in Christ. "Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent," Bonhoeffer wrote his best friend Eberhard Bethge as the holidays approached in 1943. "One waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other—things that are really of no consequence—the door is shut, and can only be opened *from the outside*."<sup>3</sup>

But the prison door was never opened for Bonhoeffer, not in life at least. As the Third Reich crumbled in April 1945, Hitler ordered the execution of some political prisoners who had conspired to overthrow him. Since papers had recently been discovered that confirmed Bonhoeffer's involvement in this anti-Nazi plot, the theologian was among those scheduled to be executed in one of Hitler's final executive decrees.<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer was hanged on April 8, 1945, just ten days before German forces began to surrender and less than three weeks before Hitler's own death by suicide. Bonhoeffer was just thirty-nine years old.

Although Bonhoeffer's death (and the narrow timing of it) is tragic, we are fortunate that he was a pro-

lific writer who left behind so many lectures, papers, letters, and diary entries from which we may piece together his theology.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Advent is rarely exactly four weeks long, and can in fact vary in length from year to year. It always begins four Sundays before Christmas (December 25), but since Christmas falls on a different day of the week each year, Advent can begin anywhere between November 27 on the early side and December 3 on the late side. The first four weeks of this devotional assume the earliest possible start date, so that if Advent falls on or around November 27, you will have four full weeks of devotions to see you through to Christmas Day. If you're using the book in a year when Advent is slightly shorter, feel free to skip a few devotions in the first or last week.

The four Advent weeks are arranged by theme—waiting, mystery, redemption, and incarnation—and are followed by devotions for the twelve days of Christmas, which stretch from Christmas Day until January 5, just before the liturgical feast of Epiphany. These last entries are dated, since the twelve days of Christmas always begin on December 25 and end on January 5, unlike the varying days of Advent. This book also includes a final reflection for January 6, the feast of Epiphany.

Each day's devotion has a reflection from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Scripture to contemplate, and some bonus material. Most of the latter material is drawn from Bonhoeffer's own letters, sermons, and poetry,

showing how he celebrated Christmas even when imprisoned and separated from family and beloved friends. It's important to remember how Bonhoeffer's beliefs were forged in the crucible of war and protest, and did not simply fall from the sky; it's equally important to recognize how intimately connected he was to those he loved. He did not exist in a vacuum. His legacy has also been profound, so a few of the bonus entries are taken from thinkers who might be called "heirs of Bonhoeffer"—contemporary Christian writers like Eugene Peterson, Luci Shaw, and Frederica Mathewes-Green, who reflect on some of the same issues that he did.

ADVENT WEEK ONE



WAITING



## DAY ONE



### The Advent Season Is a Season of Waiting

Jesus stands at the door knocking (Rev. 3:20). In total reality, he comes in the form of the beggar, of the dissolute human child in ragged clothes, asking for help. He confronts you in every person that you meet. As long as there are people, Christ will walk the earth as your neighbor, as the one through whom God calls you, speaks to you, makes demands on you. That is the great seriousness and great blessedness of the Advent message. Christ is standing at the door; he lives in the form of a human being among us. Do you want to close the door or open it?

It may strike us as strange to see Christ in such a near face, but he said it, and those who withdraw from the serious reality of the Advent message cannot talk of the coming of Christ in their heart, either. . . .

Christ is knocking. It's still not Christmas, but it's also still not the great last Advent, the last coming of Christ. Through all the Advents of our life that we celebrate runs the longing for the last Advent, when the word will be: "See, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

The Advent season is a season of waiting, but our whole life is an Advent season, that is, a season of waiting for the last Advent, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth.



We can, and should also, celebrate Christmas despite the ruins around us. . . . I think of you as you now sit together with the children and with all the Advent decorations—as in earlier years you did with us. We must do all this, even more intensively because we do not know how much longer we have.<sup>1</sup>

Letter to Bonhoeffer's parents, November 29, 1943,  
written from Tegel prison camp



Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

*Revelation 3:20*

## DAY TWO



### Waiting Is an Art

Celebrating Advent means being able to wait. Waiting is an art that our impatient age has forgotten. It wants to break open the ripe fruit when it has hardly finished planting the shoot. But all too often the greedy eyes are only deceived; the fruit that seemed so precious is still green on the inside, and disrespectful hands ungratefully toss aside what has so disappointed them. Whoever does not know the austere blessedness of waiting—that is, of hopefully doing without—will never experience the full blessing of fulfillment.

Those who do not know how it feels to struggle anxiously with the deepest questions of life, of their life, and to patiently look forward with anticipation until the truth is revealed, cannot even dream of the splendor of the moment in which clarity is illuminated for them. And for those who do not want to win the friendship and love of another person—who do not expectantly open up their soul to the soul of the other person, until friendship and love come, until they make their entrance—for such people the deepest blessing of the one life of two intertwined souls will remain forever hidden.

For the greatest, most profound, tenderest things in the world, we must wait. It happens not here in a storm but according to the divine laws of sprouting, growing, and becoming.



Be brave for my sake, dearest Maria, even if this letter is your only token of my love this Christmas-tide. We shall both experience a few dark hours — why should we disguise that from each other? We shall ponder the incomprehensibility of our lot and be assailed by the question of why, over and above the darkness already enshrouding humanity, we should be subjected to the bitter anguish of a separation whose purpose we fail to understand. . . . And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.<sup>2</sup>

Letter to fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer  
from prison, December 13, 1943



A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor.

*Isaiah 11:1–4a*

## DAY THREE



### Not Everyone Can Wait

Not everyone can wait: neither the sated nor the satisfied nor those without respect can wait. The only ones who can wait are people who carry restlessness around with them and people who look up with reverence to the greatest in the world. Thus Advent can be celebrated only by those whose souls give them no peace, who know that they are poor and incomplete, and who sense something of the greatness that is supposed to come, before which they can only bow in humble timidity, waiting until he inclines himself toward us—the Holy One himself, God in the child in the manger. God is coming; the Lord Jesus is coming; Christmas is coming. Rejoice, O Christendom!



I think we're going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that every outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious; the emptier our hands, the better we understand what Luther meant by his dying words: "We're beggars; it's true." The poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts should be Christ's home on earth.<sup>5</sup>

Letter to fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer,  
December 1, 1943



Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and  
when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you  
on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day  
and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in  
heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the  
prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that  
is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

*Luke 6:20–26*

## DAY FOUR



### An Un-Christmas-Like Idea

When the old Christendom spoke of the coming again of the Lord Jesus, it always thought first of all of a great day of judgment. And as un-Christmas-like as this idea may appear to us, it comes from early Christianity and must be taken with utter seriousness. . . . The coming of God is truly not only a joyous message, but is, first, frightful news for anyone who has a conscience. And only when we have felt the frightfulness of the matter can we know the incomparable favor. God comes in the midst of evil, in the midst of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And in judging it, he loves us, he purifies us, he sanctifies us, he comes to us with his grace and love. He makes us happy as only children can be happy.



We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us.<sup>4</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Coming  
of Jesus in Our Midst"



In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom  
he favors!”

*Luke 2:8–14*