

INTRODUCTION

I was particularly pleased to hear that Christian Focus was re-issuing *A Spoke in the Wheel* for an older readership. Good stories appeal to children and adults alike, and Pastor Bonhoeffer comes alongside the reader as a lovable, humble, fascinating guide to a colourful cast of characters. As our understanding of history matures, those who encountered this story as children will see different shades in both the people and the war we encounter here - but the vivid sense of adventure and bravery only grows stronger as we grow up.

Indeed, the courage which is one of this story's main themes grows up along with us. As children we imagine ourselves in the place of Bonhoeffer and his friends, and we are sure we could have been just as strong in the face of Nazi opposition as they. As grown-ups, however, with a greater sense of our own weakness, their courage fills us with awe. We are aware of our own fear in the face of much lesser challenges, and we can only pray that the Lord will fill up our weakness with His strength. And, giving all glory to God, we know that this is indeed how the dear martyrs of World War Two, and throughout

history, have overcome: by the blood of the Lamb, whose grace is abundantly sufficient for all who will ask for it.

But beyond the bravery which is so clearly one of the lessons we learn from Dietrich Bonhoeffer now, in another tumultuous and uncertain age, he teaches mature Christians another, and even harder, lesson. It is there in the very title of his best-known book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. It is there in the book's best-known quote:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ ... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. ... Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.

In the six years since I wrote this book, I am thankful that God has continued to teach me. And one of the greatest lessons of my middle-aged life - at last - is to count the cost of discipleship. Do we examine ourselves to forsake not only all sins, not only all idols, but all distractions that take us away from the nearness of our Lord and the joy of the Spirit? Do we take captive all of our own thoughts for Him? Are we faithful in avoiding temptation, and persistent in actively seeking God's presence? Do we take up our cross daily to follow Him, or do we try to accept His gift of life without being crucified with Him? Are we external Christians only, or is Jesus Christ master of our thoughts, times, talents, and resources?

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God's mastership of our lives, and the courage and strength we need to face the hardest circumstances, are not unrelated. It is as we trust Him, love Him, and willingly submit to Him that we are given what we need, day by day like the manna in the wilderness. Dependence on Christ alone is the key to all of it. We are never too old or too young for that lesson.

... You have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save (Isa. 46:3b, 4 rsv).

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isa. 41:10 rsv).

1945

At last the journey had come to an end.

Thirteen prisoners stumbled off the bus, stretching and blinking. The Nazi guards didn't have to push or threaten them: the prisoners were too tired and hungry after their three-day journey, all the way from Buchenwald Concentration Camp.

Most had been in prisons and concentration camps for years; cold, dingy, noisy places that smelled of death and sewer stink. Each one was a political prisoner, important in their own way, but they didn't look important. Dirty, half starved, and dressed in rags, most looked like any other inmates. Now they were led inside the only accommodation left in the tiny Bavarian village of Schonburg: the first floor of the school. The prisoners were shoved through a door and told to choose their beds.

When they turned and looked around, their mouths opened in surprise.

'I think we are in heaven,' said Pastor Bonhoeffer.

The other prisoners laughed. 'If heaven is where God is,' said a very proper English prisoner whom the guards called Herr Wolf, 'Pastor Bonhoeffer finds heaven

everywhere – I've never met a man whose God was more real to him!

But compared to the grey cells at Buchenwald, this did look like heaven. The room was a girls' dorm, full of light from the three large windows looking out at the forested valley, and plenty of soft feather beds covered with bright quilts. Above each bed was a little board where the girls wrote their names.

'Right,' said a middle-aged lady prisoner – who resembled nothing more than a headmistress – 'everyone choose their bed. My dear, let's make this young lady welcome, shall we?' She cast a meaningful look at her husband, a skinny but dignified old man, and together they shepherded a sloppy blonde girl to a bed at the far end of the room, where they could keep an eye on her.

'There's no need to police me,' the girl sulked. 'I'm not your daughter.'

'But I've never seen a young lady so in need of a mother,' the lady declared. 'War is brutal, but boarding men and ladies in the same room is really uncivilised. You know they're losing the war if it's come to this!'

The Englishman cleared his throat. 'I've a piece of chalk. We can write our names on the boards just as the little girls must do.'

'Ah, but not just our names,' said Dr Rascher, a young German with a little ginger moustache. 'Here we must celebrate our personalities. Nicknames for all!'

He first lighted on the bed of a Russian officer, a very young man dressed half in the uniform he'd worn to parachute into Germany years before, and half in civilian clothes that had replaced the worn-out bits. 'Vassily,' Rascher said jovially. The young man flinched at the loud

German voice, and made a great show of taking off his glasses and polishing them.

‘What shall we call you? The Baby, for your innocent face? Simply the Russian? No, there is only one name we could use.’ He went up to the Russian’s chalkboard and wrote, ‘The Nephew’.

The young man gave a little shrug of agreement. ‘The only reason I am still here rather than executed with all my men.’

Pastor Bonhoeffer, standing nearby, looked puzzled.

‘Did you not know?’ Rascher asked. ‘Vassily here is the nephew of Molotov – Stalin¹ rules Russia, and Molotov is his favourite person.’

‘The Nephew,’ Bonhoeffer agreed with a smile. Along with the others, he watched as Rascher skipped between each prisoner’s bed, chalking in a nickname for each person: the Wolf, the Coward, the Statesman, the Blonde Bombshell, the Aristocrat, the Ambassador, the Matron.

‘Now, Dr Rascher,’ Bonhoeffer said, ‘you are very good at observing others, but what about yourself?’

‘Oh, I’m a doctor who prescribes laughter as the best medicine – so you can call me the Clown!’ Rascher exclaimed, bowing low. ‘But now we come to you, Pastor Bonhoeffer. How would you describe yourself?’

1. Josef Stalin was the communist dictator of Russia at this time. He was interested in Russian national pride but not in Russian people. One of his instructions was that any Russian soldier who turned back from battle or had been taken prisoner should be executed, both because being captured brought disgrace on the soldiers, and to show that it was absolutely necessary to beat the enemy – or pay the price. Molotov, a politician, was one of Stalin’s most loyal supporters. The Nephew’s real name was Vassily Kokorin.

Dietrich paused for a moment. How could he describe himself? He had no very defining physical characteristics. He had once been a stocky, muscular man, but now had the shrunken look of all long-term prisoners. He had a cheerful face, rimless glasses, and only a few strands of bright blond hair left on his wide forehead, though he was only thirty-six. He could describe himself as the Pianist, or the Academic, or the Radical, or the Man of Many Languages.

'I would suggest simply Brother Bonhoeffer,' he finally said.

'Dull! Something with more flair.'

'He's the Genius,' suggested the Aristocrat, who had known Dietrich's family before prison.

'He's the Man of God,' called out the Wolf.

'Both true, but unimaginative,' Rascher replied. 'I'll give him a name equally accurate, but one that no one will expect.' He reached up and, with undisguised glee, chalked in the words 'The Tyrannicide.' He made a sweeping gesture, as if presenting him anew to the other prisoners. 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The pastor who wanted to kill the Fuhrer!'

'That true?' asked the Wolf. 'If so, you're in good company here, old chap.'

'I was never going to plant a bomb or pull a trigger,' Dietrich said. 'I simply carried messages.' He turned to Rascher. 'But how did you know?'

'Ah well,' Rascher shrugged, 'it is not so long since I knew about everything connected with the Nazi government. I worked directly under Himmler, who organised the death camps.'

'Then why are you here?'

‘The Fuhrer knows, dear Pastor Bonhoeffer,’ Rascher replied with a short laugh. ‘Only our dear good Fuhrer on high knows.’

‘You’re mocking me,’ Dietrich said calmly.

‘You say your God is good, but here you are, in the same place as me. What do you really know of your God and His goodness? Why are you here – if He is truly good and truly powerful?’

‘Dear me,’ the Wolf broke in hurriedly. ‘I don’t think I can take the destruction of the Christian faith on an empty stomach. I don’t know whether it’s the conversation or the starvation, but I’m feeling a trifle light-headed.’

He strode over to the door and banged as loudly as he could, keeping up the noise until one of the guards came to the door. ‘Ah, my good man,’ he said. ‘What tidings of dinner?’

‘I wish I knew,’ the guard replied. ‘Alas, Herr Wolf, there is nothing cooking either for you or us.’

‘That will never do,’ the Wolf replied briskly. ‘Tell the commandant we wish to see him.’

‘Yes, sir, but I don’t know it will do much good.’

A moment later the commandant appeared in the room. ‘Herr Wolf,’ he said, with a nod to the rest of the prisoners. ‘You made a complaint?’

‘Not a complaint, sir, a request. We’ve been on the road for three days, and haven’t had a good meal all that time. When’s grub?’

The commandant shook his head apologetically. Wearing six years of war, he was far from the image of a brutal Nazi officer. ‘We have no food, not even for my men. This village is already billeting several dozen prisoners, and the mayor absolutely refuses to give us

more out of their small store of provisions. There is a town an hour or two away, but we have no petrol to drive there and bring back food. I am doing everything I can.'

'This is a very serious matter,' the Wolf said gravely. 'We are political prisoners. That means we're due rations at double the rate of your soldiers. Starving us is illegal. You know the war is almost over, and I should hate for our governments to take stern measures against you for our treatment.'

The commandant sighed. 'Well, you will have to make a complaint about me, Herr Wolf, if you don't starve first. There's nothing I can do. The best thing is for you all to sleep. Perhaps by the time you awake we may have some breakfast for you.'

He backed out of the room and quickly turned the lock again.

'The way you speak to them!' the Coward said, with a mixture of horror and admiration. He looked near tears.

'I've been a prisoner for five and a half years – one learns to treat them simply as fellow officers,' the Wolf replied. 'Anyway, little good it did our tummies.'

'If I die before morning,' the Nephew said despondently, 'I suppose is better than die before Stalin's firing squad. I know he kills every soldier who was captured.'

'I shouldn't think it will come to that,' said the formidable lady, whose board read The Matron. 'Chins up, boys. I'll see what I can do. Herr Wolf, will you kindly get our guard's attention? I think I'd better make an excuse to go to the "little room"'