

Week 4 – Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“God’s Loving Care and Human Suffering”, delivered at the Harvest Festival,
October 4, 1931

Background

Following the conclusion of Bonhoeffer’s one-year term as curate of the German congregation in Barcelona, Spain, he returned to Germany in February 1929. In May 1930, he received confirmation of the awarding of a Sloane Fellowship, enabling him to travel to the United States and study for one year at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. During his time in the United States, which lasted from September 1930 to June 1931, he traveled extensively, visiting Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., the Midwest, New Orleans, Cuba and Mexico. He also became actively involved in the life of Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church, where he taught Sunday school and developed a deep love of American spiritual music.

Upon his return to Germany, Bonhoeffer became a lecturer in theology at the University of Berlin. This particular sermon was delivered on the occasion of the Harvest Festival. In Germany, the traditional thanksgiving celebration is a religious festival held after the harvest to thank God for the gifts of nature essential to our survival. Altars decorated with bountiful harvest offerings symbolise the festival, with harvest wreaths and crowns made of grain stalks adorning the church halls.

Text

“Your steadfast love is better than life.” (Psalm 63:3)

Sermon Text

Two and a half millennia have now passed since the ancient Jewish saint, far from Jerusalem and his homeland, devoured by misery in body and soul, surrounded by mockers and enemies of his God, pondered the strange and wonderful ways God had led him. It was no easy, peaceful meditation. It was a struggle for God and God’s faithfulness. The pillars of life had crumbled away. Where his hand thought it had found firm support it reached into any empty nothingness. “God, where are you? God, who am I? My life falls crashing down into the bottomless abyss. God, I am afraid, where has your goodness gone? And yet, you are my God and your goodness is better than life.” That is one of the words that does not let you go once you have understood it, a word that seems to shine gently, but is inwardly hard, a word of passion that is engendered where two worlds clash, that is, a word from the world of the Bible and not from our own.

The words of this text, “Your goodness is better than life,” seem to shine gently, but inwardly they are hard words. These words are full of passion conceived in the conflict of two different worlds, the world of the Bible in conflict with our own.

“Your goodness is better than life”: It is the exultant cry of the wretched and abandoned, of the weary and overburdened; the cry of longing uttered by the sick and the oppressed; the song of

praise among the unemployed and the hungry in the great cities; the prayer of thanksgiving prayed by tax collectors and prostitutes, by sinners known and unknown. Well, is that really their shout of joy? No, it is not, not in our world, at any rate not in our age. It is the shout of joy for the peculiar world of the Bible, which frightens and angers us with its strangeness, at least as far as we still listen to its message and have not become insensitive to the reality of the Bible. Or perhaps the verse does not seem so particularly remarkable after all. Perhaps we think that it is perfectly self-evident. These things have become part of the life of a Christian. If that is how we think, we shall have to discover what the psalmist is really saying here and whether it is really so obvious.

At some point in our psalmist's life something quite decisive happened: God came into his life. From that moment his life was changed. I don't mean that suddenly he became good and pious – it may well be that he was that before God came. But now none other than God had come and had drawn near to him. What made his life remarkable was simply that God was always there with him and he could no longer get away from God. It completely tore his life apart. We so often hear and say that religion makes people happy and harmonious and peaceful and content. Maybe that's true of religion; but it is not true of God and dealings with humankind. It is utterly wrong. This is what the psalmist discovered. Something had burst open inside him. He felt as if he were split in two. A struggle flared up within him, which every day became more and more heated and terrible. He experienced hour by hour how his old beliefs were being torn out of inner being. He struggled desperately to hold on to them; but God, standing ever before him, had taken them from him and would never give them back. And the more he loses, the more firmly and eagerly he grabs at what is left; but the more firmly he holds on to what he has, the harder must God strike to break it free and the more it hurts when it is torn away. And so the breathless struggle goes on, with God the victor and the person defeated; he no longer knows where it will all lead to and he sees that he is lost; he does not know whether he hates or loves the one who has forced his way so violently into his life and destroyed his peace. He struggles for every inch and in despair yields to the weapons of God. And his position would not be quite so hopeless were it not for the fact that God's weapons are so strange and wonderful, that they cast down and lift up, that they wound and yet heal, that they kill and yet bring life; God speaks: "If you want my mercy, then let me gain the victory over you; if you want my life, then let me hate and destroy that which is evil in you; if you want my goodness, then let me take your life." And now it has come to the final struggle. Everything has been surrendered up and only one thing has been left to the person, which he is determined to hold on to: his life. Still, God will not call a halt, but storms this last citadel of all. And so the battle rages on for the last thing which he has; the individual defends himself like a mad person. God cannot want this; God is not cruel; God is good and kind. And yet the answer comes back: "If you want my goodness then give me the last thing that you have, give me your life. Now choose!"

Such heights terrify us; it is as if someone led us up to the limits of the world and as if we looked down into an abyss and he said: "Now jump!" We feel as if we had been torn apart. How can we choose between God's goodness and our life? What is our life? Everything that we see, touch, hear, taste, feel; everything which surrounds us, which we possess, which we are used to, which we love. What is God's goodness? In any case everything which we cannot see, cannot touch, cannot comprehend, and indeed cannot believe; something which we do not possess, something quite improbable, something outside this world, standing above and behind all events,

and yet which speaks to us so directly. Who would venture to make a free choice here? It is God who gains the victory, and it seems humanly impossible that we should now hear from the psalmist's lips the words: "God, you are my God. Your goodness is better than life."

Some of you will by now be indignant and you will begin to object: What sort of exaggerated and wild talk is this? You can't talk about the goodness of God in that way. That I'm in good health, that I've still got food and drink to share with my family, that I've got work and a house, that's what God's goodness means to me and that's what I should thank God for. But I neither know nor understand anything of this struggle with God's goodness.

My friends, today is harvest festival and a very proper time for us to reflect seriously about what God's goodness means to us. Unmoved by the bitter worries and unrest of our time, nature goes about its work in the world. It produces food for the peoples of the earth. When it withholds its gifts, millions die; when it bestows them lavishly humankind flourishes. No persons have control over it and when they are confronted by its power, they grow silent and are reminded of God who has the power over nature. Today we celebrate our harvest festival in particular circumstances and with specific thoughts in mind. The harvest has not brought us what we hoped for. This has already caused us great sorrow. But on top of this comes one of the worst plagues which can ever be inflicted on a people, and which is now spreading across the world, unemployment. We must be prepared for the fact that this winter seven million people in Germany will find no work, which means hunger for fifteen to twenty million people next winter. Another twelve million or more in England, twenty or more in America, while at this very moment sixteen million are starving in China and the situation is not much better in India. These are the cold statistics behind which stands a terrible reality. Should we overlook these millions of people when we celebrate our harvest festival in church? We dare not. Rather we should want to measure our Christian thinking and intentions by how well we respond to these facts.

When we sit down this evening to a full table and say grace and thank God for God's goodness, we shall not be able to avoid a strange feeling of uneasiness. It will seem incomprehensible to us that we should be the ones to receive such gifts and we will be overwhelmed by such thoughts and will think that we have not in any way deserved these gifts more than our hungry brothers and sisters in our town. What if, precisely at the moment when we are thanking God for God's goodness toward us, there is a ring at the door, as so often happens these days, and we find someone standing there who also would like to thank God for some small gift, but to whom such a gift has been denied and who is starving with starving children and who will go to bed in bitterness? What becomes of our grace in such moments? Will we really feel like saying that God is merciful to *us* and angry with *them*, or that the fact that we still have something to eat proves that we have won a special position of favor in God's sight, that God feeds the favorite children and lets the unworthy go hungry? May the merciful God protect us from the temptation of such gratitude. May God lead us to a true understanding of God's goodness. Don't we see that the gifts of God's goodness become a curse for us if we have such thoughts about them and act in such a way; if we look upon ourselves as models of virtue, instead of growing humble as we look at the incomprehensibility of God and the worry and anxiety our wealth creates in us and if we thank God only for God's goodness to us instead of becoming conscious of the immeasurable responsibility which is laid upon us by God's goodness? If we want to understand

God's goodness in God's gifts, then we must think of them as a responsibility we bear for our brothers and sisters. Let none say: God has blessed us with money and possessions, and then lives as if they and their God were alone in the world. For the time will come when they realize that they have been worshipping the idols of their good fortune and selfishness. Possessions are not God's blessing and goodness, but the opportunities of service which God entrusts to us.

This has already brought us some distance along the way toward understanding what God's goodness is. Whoever have tasks laid upon them by God see themselves set between two worlds: "If you want my goodness to stay with you, then serve your neighbors, for in them God comes to you"; such people see in their neighbors the material and spiritual need for which they are now called to account. And now the struggle is played out of which the psalmist speaks. "If you want my mercy, then give your neighbor your soul. If you want my goodness then stake your life for your neighbor. And if you don't do all this, then that which was God's goodness to you, the gifts which God showered on your body and soul, will turn into a curse on you." Which of us would care to say that we had done all this, that in our thoughts and particularly in our actions we had really understood that God's goodness leads us into a struggle, that is not something which we receive and then simply possess, so that we live on, somewhat happier, somewhat richer, but essentially unaltered. But how miserably we enter on this struggle; with so little passion and with so much fear, weakness, trembling, and sadness; and how little does it really take hold of the roots of our being. Yet we shall not understand this struggle at all until we understand how radical and basic it is. "Your goodness is better than life" does not just mean better than your house, than your food, than your work, than your reputation, than your honor, than your physical, artistic, and spiritual pleasures, than your wife or husband and children, but it means more than all of that; it means that it is better than the one thing you still have when you have lost everything, better than your life. Which of us has already come to know that God's goodness leads us into a conflict, which involves the physical side of our life, and not only that but also our work, our honor, and even our family? Who would allow themselves to be drawn into such a conflict and who would see in such a conflict God's goodness? And above all, who sees that we have not grasped the meaning of God's goodness until the conflict goes much deeper and seizes hold of our life and reaches out beyond even that? ...

But now comes the greatest wonder that the world has ever known. In the very place where we have fallen away from God, where we have become dead and unresponsive to God, in our guilt, God's goodness searches us out, and is revealed to us again and *the* eternal promise of God, in Jesus Christ, which far surpasses all guilt and all life. Only the person who, in the darkness of guilt, of unfaithfulness, of enmity toward God, has felt himself or herself touched by the love which never ceases, which forgives everything and which points beyond all misery to the world of God, only such a person really knows what God's goodness means.

But of course we are not lifted out of life. Our task still remains with us and we are continually asked by God: "What is my love worth to you?" But the more deeply we recognize what God's goodness is, the more lively our answer will be, and again we shall be led by God's goodness to assume our responsibility and will be brought to God again through our acknowledged guilt. When will the time come that, at least in the Christian community, the world of our psalmist will break in, and in happiness or in misery, in hunger or in sickness, in fear or trouble, in sadness or guilt, in good or bad harvest can we make a truly joyful thanksgiving:

And though they take our life,
Goods, honor, children, wife,
yet is their profit small;
These things shall vanish all:
The City of God remaineth!

O God, your goodness is better than life – Amen.