Translated excerpt

Alois Prinz
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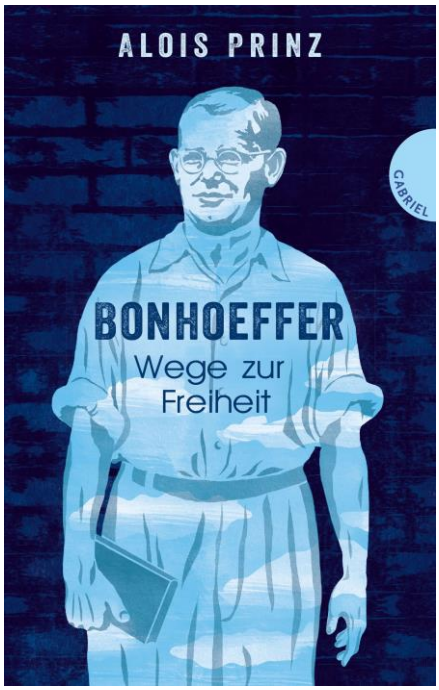

Paths to Freedom

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Prologue

In the Prophet’s Room or

The Big Decision

The guest room at the *Union Theological Seminary* in New York is called the “Prophecy Chamber.” The German theologian and Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer moved in there on June 13, 1939. Dietrich knew the seminar and the city from nine years earlier, when as a young man he had stayed there on scholarship to learn about the country and people. His visit this time, however, began under entirely different auspices. He had to flee Germany. His age group was due to be drafted. As a soldier he would have to swear an oath to Adolf Hitler and be forced to carry a weapon in battle. As a Christian that is out of the question for him, yet if he refuses to go, he risks being sent to a concentration camp or sentenced to death. Dietrich was fortunate. His father, a recognized professor of psychiatry, used his connections to delay Dietrich's medical examination. Friends in America did all they could to help get him out of Germany. They firmly believe Dietrich will stay in the USA where he would be safe. Yet on the sea voyage he was unsure if it was right to flee. “If only it would be possible to overcome the doubts about one’s own path,” he had written in his diary.

The doubts cannot be dispelled. Not even when the president of the *Union Theological Seminary*, Henry Coffin, invites him to his country home in Massachusetts. Coffin feels honored by the visit. Despite his youth, the thirty-three year old Bonhoeffer is considered one of the most important German theologians and foremost masterminds of the ecclesiastical opposition to Hitler. This counter-church, the so-called Confessing Church, had come under increasing political pressure and many of its followers were sent to prison or concentration camps. While Dietrich enjoys having conversations with Coffin, and is inspired by the beauty of the landscape, he feels he is not in the right place. He plans to stay a year, but no longer. “I don't understand why I'm here,” he writes.

His thoughts are with his friends in Germany. They had formed a community in a remote estate near Szczecin. Dietrich was their teacher. He was supposed to prepare them for a profession as pastors. But he also was their “brother.” Together they wanted to form a Christian community. Dietrich firmly believed this was the only way one could acquire the necessary inner strength to remain true to one’s faith and engage in acts of resistance under an unjust regime. The illegal seminar was shut down by the Secret State Police in June 1938. Dietrich and his friends wouldn’t be discouraged and continued their work underground. Now his companions were forced to manage without him. He constantly wonders what will happen to the young men who had entrusted their lives to him and followed his lead. Will they be arrested? Will they be sent to war as soldiers which appears to be inevitable? Is he, Dietrich, to blame for their fate?

Many of Dietrich's companions had agreed to comply with the state. He remained unfaltering. Or was it just his dogmatic nature that made him so steadfast? Is it true, as some believed that he was an arrogant know-it-all, or even a dangerous fanatic, who did more harm to the Church than good? Dietrich often asked himself those very questions. Sometimes he felt he didn't know himself at all. But ultimately he never allowed himself to be swayed away from his beliefs. Perhaps it had something to do with his upbringing. As a child, he had been taught to distrust catchphrases and remain tenacious. This made him immune at an early age to Nazi propaganda. Their narrow-minded nationalism was alien to him. Dietrich had travelled extensively to Rome, Spain and Africa. He had driven a car across the United States and had witnessed the oppression of the black people there. He believed it self-evident that all humans are created equal and that it was incompatible with the Bible to believe the “Jewish race” was inferior. One cannot, he said, be a Christian and a National Socialist at the same time.

In New York, Dietrich was often invited on excursions and to parties. In conversations about music and childrearing, he remained polite and approachable as always. But inside, he was completely indifferent to everything he heard. He could not stop thinking it had been a mistake to flee. Alone in his prophet's room Dietrich paces back and forth, and racks his brains about what to do. He smokes a lot of cigarettes, takes notes and writes in his diary. He continually reaches for the Bible in search of an answer. He was offered the opportunity to give lectures and care for refugees from Germany. Dare he refuse? He had asked his American

friends for their support. Wouldn’t it be unthinkable, cowardly, weak and ungrateful, to simply run away? But where is he really needed? Isn't the news from Germany alarming? “If things get more turbulent, I will most certainly return to Germany,” he writes in his diary. “I can't stay away. That’s perfectly clear to me. I live over there.” He plans to return in August.

When he tires of being cooped up in his room, Dietrich goes to Times Square or walks restlessly for hours through the streets of Manhattan. He has to make up his mind. But how? His first autonomous decision was to study theology. He will never forget the time when he had told the entire group of students in his class about his plans shortly before graduating. He was very ambitious at the beginning of his studies. Already by age twenty-two he had earned his doctorate. By the age of twenty-four he gave his first lecture at the university. Always the youngest, always the best.

But then something had changed within him. He began reading the Bible from a different perspective. His personal thoughts and career no longer mattered; instead he needed to know what God expected from him. This turn of events in his life brought him joy, and the sense he finally was “on the right track.” This track led him to live a life in tune with the values of the Bible. “Discipleship” was the term he coined for it. This discipleship is based on faith, but it inevitably turns political when human rights are trampled underfoot. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had long been an apolitical man. Only as a theologian and Christian did he become a political rebel. His opposition can only be understood in terms of his faith and theological beliefs.

Should he stay or take the next ship home? Dietrich weighs the pros and cons. He should have been relieved to have escaped the peril in Germany. His sister Sabine also was forced to flee abroad with her Jewish husband. Many people whose lives were threatened in Germany could not leave the country as he could. And others who had fled or had to flee were supporting the resistance against Hitler’s regime from abroad. Should he, Dietrich, do the same? He has many contacts in other countries to clerical and political circles.

All of these considerations are reasonable. They may be right for others. But for him? What is right for him? Dietrich is convinced that the deepest motives for his actions cannot be fathomed. Of course, you can justify anything. But ultimately, every decision is a decision made in the dark. You can only hope and believe you

are being led by a higher will and that it is possible to entrust yourself to this will. Without trusting that the mistakes you make and the guilt you are burdened with will be forgiven, you could neither decide, nor act.

Dietrich fears the decisive conversation with Professor Henry Leiper, who has campaigned on his behalf as no other. On July 20th, they meet for lunch. Leiper has concrete plans for Dietrich's future in the United States. Dietrich turns down everything. Leiper is disappointed and annoyed. But Dietrich cannot be deterred from his decision.

“It probably means more to me at the moment than I am able to ignore. God alone knows,” he writes in his diary that evening. “It's strange, I'm never completely sure about the motives behind all my decisions. Is this a sign of confusion, inner dishonesty, or is it a sign we are being led beyond our awareness, or is it both?”

On July 7th, Dietrich boards the ship that will take him back to Germany. It leaves shortly after midnight. It had been a very warm summery day and the moon hovers over Manhattan's skyscrapers. Twenty-six days he had stayed. He does not regret having taken the journey. But now he's relieved. His inner conflict has been resolved. He knows that he has learned something crucial that will influence all of his future decisions. He writes in his diary, “This trip will probably have a great impact on me.”

When Dietrich's successor, the new guest lecturer, moves into the Prophet's Room, he is surprised by the disorder. Filled ashtrays on all the tables. Sheets of paper scattered everywhere covered in writing. He couldn’t have known that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had made the most important decision of his life in that room.

Chapter 5

Solid Ground and a Distant God

The Berlin Dietrich Bonhoeffer had returned to from Italy had grown into a hectic metropolis; it was the third largest city in the world with countless cafés, bars, nightclubs, theaters, cinemas, jazz cellars and pubs, where the latest import from America, the Charleston, was danced. An effervescent joie de vivre coupled with a fatalistic mood and deep fear of the future was felt everywhere. Writers such as Ernest Hemingway personified the catchphrase “lost generation.” Indeed, it was this young generation that had experienced the collapse of the old patriarchal world order after World War II that now was lost and disoriented. Klaus Mann, who saw himself as the spokesman for this generation, had said young people lacked solid ground under their feet,” and were “helplessly caught between all extremes” without a leader.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed the metropolis was where one most intensely felt what people had been longing for and missing in their lives. Beneath the desire for entertainment and variety, he heard a desperate cry for a meaning in life, a great “thirst” that would not be quenched by the “hype glorifying the new ways and means.” “In the midst of our cities and wildest hustle and bustle,” he wrote, “countless masses of people have succumbed to the great misery of loneliness and homelessness.”

Without experiencing all too much of the “wild hustle and bustle” in Berlin, Dietrich returned to the sheltered world of his family home in the professors' neighborhood of Grunewald. Little was left of the Dietrich seen strolling the streets of Rome a few weeks earlier, enthusing over the play of colors on the sea and the southern sky. His life as a student was entirely devoted to studying. He gained weight from sitting so much, which provoked his sisters to make nasty comments about his looks. Dietrich went for walks and did some sports to live up to their “sense of beauty.” Sometimes he went to the theater with one of his sisters or to an operetta with his grandmother. Julie Bonhoeffer, the sister Dietrich loved best, had moved from Tübingen to Berlin and was now living with the family as well.

At times, four generations gathered in the large villa on Wagenheimstraße. Ursula, the eldest of the daughters, was now married to the lawyer Rüdiger Schleicher, who

was the son of an old college friend of Karl Bonhoeffer's. Since they had not found a suitable apartment, the young couple and their first child Hans-Walter took up residence in the attic of the house. Christine, nicknamed Christel, was engaged to her schoolmate Hans von Dohnanyi. Sabine, Dietrich's twin sister, was engaged to the lawyer "Gert" Gerhard Leibholz. At first the parents were unhappy about this union. "What nonsense are you up to?" the father said to Sabine. He liked the young Leibholz, but was concerned about his career because he was Jewish.

Karl Bonhoeffer had experienced prejudice and anti-Semitism in Germany. He had tried in vain to support a young Jewish colleague and was confronted with vehement anti-Semitism. Getting engaged let alone married was unthinkable for Dietrich. He was too young and insecure for a family of his own and, as friendly and sociable as he was, he did not let anyone get close to him. He never had a real friend, let alone a girlfriend. At a carnival celebration at his family home, he dressed up as cupid and shot the guests with arrows. But a cupid can't get pierced by cupid's arrow.

Family was the solid ground under Dietrich's feet. At the same time, he longed for an "upheaval" in his life. He had the impulse to leave this solid ground and, as he once remarked, leave his familiar social circle and "stand completely on his own feet." This was especially true for his studies. Up to that point, he had done what the family had expected both of him and his brothers, namely to study quickly and be successful. Dietrich was an overachiever compared to his fellow students. But hadn't he chosen theology because he wanted to deepen his personal faith and find his very own point of view?

The faculty in Berlin was a stronghold of liberal theology and its figurehead was the highly esteemed and respected Adolf von Harnack. Harnack stood for the firm link between theology and science. According to his credo, everything emotional and unconscious remained "subhuman" as long as it was not understood and "purified" by reason. A theology that separated from reason did not exist for him. Harnack was already more than seventy years old and retired from academia. He held lectures and a seminar only for a select circle. Dietrich was invited to this circle and during the first few sessions had impressed the participants with his knowledge.

Adolf von Harnack and his family also lived in the professors' quarter in Grunewald, and were practically neighbors with the Bonhoeffer's. Dietrich often accompanied him to the Halensee train station when they both rushed to the university. Harnack embodied everything Dietrich had learned from his parents' upbringing—faith in science, skepticism towards catchphrases, the importance of religion for an educated middle-class milieu. Harnack also taught Dietrich how to analyze the Bible scientifically. For liberal theologians such as himself, the Bible was not God's unmediated word; rather it consisted of texts written by people from a specific time period. Therefore, one had to treat them as if they were historical documents and explore the influences of the times, in order to reveal the original Christian message. Dietrich proved to be a receptive student. Harnack was so impressed by a seminar paper he had written, he told Dietrich he hoped he would one day become a professor of church history. Receiving such praise from a luminary like Harnack at age eighteen was the highest accolade he could possibly have hoped for. But was such a career really his goal?

Harnack must have been surprised, even irritated, when his model student Dietrich suddenly showed a different side and did something the participants of the seminar would consider unthinkable. He contradicted "His Excellency von Harnack." And when the professor answered politely, the rebellious student was not satisfied and contradicted him once again. Dietrich actually defended the views of a theologian Harnack bitterly disliked. His name was Karl Barth and Harnack blamed him personally for the decline of theology.

Karl Barth was fairly the opposite of Harnack in every way. Before he was hired as a professor in Göttingen, he had spent many years as a pastor in the small village of Safenwil in the Canton of Aargau. There he was expected to comfort the factory workers over their miserable existence. Instead, Barth took the side of the workers and was scorned as the "red priest" by his opponents. This experience had radically changed Barth's image of God. Every Sunday he struggled with the question of whether in his sermons he genuinely had something to say to the people. In any case, he no longer wished to talk to them about a God that is appropriated by humans to give their reprehensible actions a moral veneer. For Barth, it was particularly shameful that so many churchmen and theologians were among the worst warmongers. Instead of distancing themselves from the powerful, and defending the values of the Bible, they bestowed upon war the highest order,

blessed cannons, sanctified killing, and demonized Germany's opponents. In other words, they had fabricated a god for their own purposes, who, according to Karl Barth, had nothing to do with the God of the Bible.

In his numerous books, Barth endeavored to protect God from this human abuse. He went as far as to claim there was an irreconcilable contradiction between man and God. Human beings can never overcome this abyss; only God can turn to humans by an act of free will, theologically speaking, by revealing himself - in Jesus and in the Scriptures of the Bible. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "There is no path for humans to God…only the path of God to humans." Therefore, humans can only be receivers, listeners. To think that one is able to command God, therefore, is the greatest sin. Even with reason and science God cannot be controlled. When you talk about God, you must acknowledge, in the same breath, the impossibility of talking about him. To think and speak in opposites in this way is to engage in "dialectical theology."

Karl Barth's thoughts were eagerly received by young people especially - and not only among theologians. Dietrich's cousin Hans-Christoph von Hase, who studied physics in Göttingen, was so impressed by Barth that he switched his major to theology. On walks together, he and Dietrich talked their heads off about this "merry partisan of God" who listened to Mozart every day, who loved his pipe and women, and for whom there was nothing worse than morose thoughts and boring sermons. For Dietrich, Barth was a blessing. He always had to defend his choice of profession to his father, brothers, science. Barth had liberated the "thing with God" from all bonds and dependencies. To certify his right to exist as a theologian, he did not have to prove its scientific character or its usefulness for society. Representing the Word of God alone was justification enough and it helped Dietrich display a newly gained self-confidence. If he followed Barth, however, he would have to question the bourgeois Christianity he had been raised with since childhood.

But that was not so easy. Dietrich was deeply rooted in his family and their values. There was no reason for him to rebel against them, especially as his parents took an active part in his studies and he appreciated their advice. His mother even read books Dietrich was interested in, so she could find out what her son was grappling with intellectually. And his father knew all the professors he was studying with and he made a point of asking them about his son's progress. Dietrich could not and did not want to do without the "solid ground" of his family. This was the cause of a

deep inner conflict. He did not want to let go of his secure bourgeois existence, yet simultaneously tried to break away from it. He wanted to be a recognized scientist as well as a pious rebel for whom only the Word of God counted. He wanted to be an obedient son as well as discover his own place in the world. Does one rule out the other? Or is it possible to combine the two?

Dietrich attempted just that. He remained the gifted student, writing eight seminar papers and countless lectures in three academic years. He also completed a doctoral dissertation. But all this was no longer a purely "academic affair" for him. When he wrote a paper about "Luther's moods," it was clear he also included his own questions about life's meaning. Luther's wavering between the "exhilaration" of not being appointed, and devastating bouts of self-doubt, was something Dietrich also was quite familiar with. The "inner enemies", he wrote, were "always worse than the ones on the outside." Few knew or suspected that Dietrich often suffered from depression. There was no talk of such personal problems on the Wagenheimstraße. Such things were handled alone.

Dietrich also was left alone with his doubts about his studies. Once he had risked expressing as much in a lecture and promptly received the worst mark, which came as a shock, accustomed as he was to success. Dietrich had criticized the scientific method of reading the Bible as though it were purely an historical text. What was left, he said, was ruins "shards and rubble". Dietrich was not in search of non-committal knowledge in which one's own existence must be excluded; instead he wanted to find the living word of God, so that he could base his life and salvation on it. The words of the Bible, he was convinced, were dead if you treated them only as information about past events, without perceiving the spirit behind them, which always had the capacity to change one's life. In the spirit of his new role model Karl Barth, Dietrich believed that while God's Word is unfathomable, it is "tangible and predicable." There is Revelation, "where one hears it, where the Word of God becomes the Word of humankind, when time becomes eternity."

Dietrich had given his paper to Reinhold Seeberg, a dogmatic professor. Seeberg, who was one of Germany's most assiduous war orators, and who represented the disastrous alliance between religion and nationalism, had placed several question marks on the margins of Dietrich's work and wrote the word "No!" It was, therefore, all the more surprising that Dietrich would choose him as his doctoral supervisor. During a walk together, Dietrich was astonished that Seeberg suddenly

seemed convinced of his abilities. The change of heart probably came from the fact that Seeberg knew Dietrich's father and had had a long conversation with him about the young man. Seeberg also gave his approval for the topic of the planned doctoral thesis, “religious community.”

What Seeberg held in his hands after one and a half years of work was an all-encompassing text entitled *Sanctorum Communio*, i. e. “Community of Saints”. It was, one might say, a blend of Harnack and Barth. Dietrich adopted from Barth the notion of a distant God. More importantly for Dietrich, however, was the question of how and where this God, who turns towards man, manifests in concrete reality. His answer was not the individual who had religious feelings, but the Church, which must be understood as a community of believers. What distinguishes this community from others, such as a sports club, a political party or a family is that there is no purpose that holds the members together, none except for God's spirit at work. According to Dietrich, this is a reality that cannot be objectively proven, but is accessible to everybody, “the eyes have to see and the ears have to hear.” A believed reality is just as real for Dietrich as are tangible and visible facts. Moreover, he claims reality created by divine affection for the world is the actual reality. Without faith in this reality, there is no Christianity for him.

The special thing about this ecclesial community is that although all are united by one Spirit, the individual does not disappear into the masses. On the contrary. For Dietrich, the Church is only a real community if the individuality of each person is maintained and promoted as much as possible. “God does not want a community that absorbs the individual,” says Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” but a community of people.”

This community must not isolate itself from the state and cultural life, but it should not merge with them either. By representing the Word of God, the Church remains a critical authority for politics and society. Ultimately, human beings are obligated only to God; the Church is merely a mediator. The connection to the Church can only be torn apart when it “stands in the way of an absolute link to God.”

The reason community and church was so important to Dietrich certainly can be traced back to his experiences in Rome, but it also is an expression of his longing for closeness and friendship. His studies offered him the opportunity not only to think theoretically about community, but also to experience it in practice. In the

Grunewald church he took over the services for children. And picture this, Dietrich, who was considered reserved and withdrawn, became the children's favorite. His mother's religious education indeed had paid off. She used to tell Dietrich Biblical stories as though they were exciting and enigmatic fairy tales. Dietrich invited the older children to his home on Wagenheimstraße, where they talked about God and the world, and he played piano for them.

Dietrich had more difficulties opening up in front of adults. Outside of the family, he hardly addressed anybody by the informal “you” form. Eberhard Bethge, who later became his best and perhaps only friend, described Dietrich as a person who was lonely throughout his life, yet he also acquiesced to this loneliness and even defended it. In fact, he warned against joining a community if you can't be alone. There was always a last remnant of strangeness when relating to another, he maintained, and this strangeness had to be respected as it prevents the desire to get too close to another person. A certain boundary must not be crossed.

Had Dietrich drawn too narrow a line for himself? In any case, it prevented a happy ending to his first great love. Her name was Elisabeth Zinn, she was a year younger than he, and one of the few women who had studied Protestant theology. They were very fond of each other and often went together to the theater and exhibitions. They talked a great deal about theology and art, but never about their feelings. Dietrich had never learned how to do that. While they did become lovers, neither of them knew that they were loved, or at least they never had articulated it as such. The relationship lasted a long time, many years, but when they finally were able to talk about their feelings, it was too late. Speechlessness had led to alienation. Dietrich later wrote: “We had lived past each other for too long and misunderstood each other. We could never quite understand each other again. I told her that back then. Two years later she got married and gradually the burden I carried within me had subsided. We never saw each other again, and we never wrote. I sensed at the time that if ever I got married, it could only be to a much younger girl.”

In mid-December 1927, Dietrich Bonhoeffer passed his doctoral examinations with the highest possible marks *summa cum laude*. He was only twenty-one years old. A few weeks later, he also passed his first ecclesiastical examination. Now he was free to pursue an academic career at the university or serve the church. For his family it was self-evident that he would pursue a career as a university teacher. Dietrich wasn’t so sure. He spent many evenings consulting with his parents, yet he

never had the feeling that the most important point was discussed: it was crucial for him to “start at the beginning.” Until then, he had always fulfilled his parents' expectations. Everything had happened on its own accord, without him ever giving a clear yes or no which direction. In his diary, he wrote: “Recently I've repeatedly noticed that all the decisions I had ever made never were actually my own decisions.

In November, Berlin's Superintendent Max Diestel had contacted Dietrich by telephone and asked him whether he would like to go to Barcelona and work as a vicar. Dietrich couldn't make up his mind, but he knew instinctively that he should seize this opportunity and leave the familiar social circle where he grew up. There was one farewell party after another and many social visits. On February 8, 1928, the time had come. The parents and all his siblings gathered for a farewell dinner on the Wagenheimstraße. At ten o' clock in the evening, two taxis were ordered and everybody accompanied Dietrich to the train station. Only grandmother Julie stayed home. Dietrich found it particularly difficult to say goodbye to her. On the platform, tears were shed and white handkerchiefs waved. “At 11 o' clock there was a whistle and the train started.”

More than a year before Dietrich's departure, on the evening of November 9, 1927, a small man with a limp had left the train at the Anhalterbahnhof train station in Berlin. His name was Joseph Goebbels. He had been appointed by Adolf Hitler as Gauleiter of Berlin and was given the task to defeat the “red” communist-ruled city for the NSDAP. In Berlin, the National Socialists were a small and divided bunch that nobody paid any attention to. Goebbels whipped the party headquarters on the Potsdamer Strasse into shape and set about conquering the streets with the help of the SA.

Goebbels had his own “faith.” He was convinced if you have an idea, and if you believe in it strongly enough, fanatically, you can realize it. The principle he followed was, therefore, very simple. He had one goal, namely to make the Nazis the strongest force in the German capital. Any means that served this purpose was good, and any means that did not serve this purpose was bad. Good was what was successful. According to Goebbels, only those who attracted attention could be successful, regardless how. Therefore, he ordered SA troops to sing and march through the red districts of the city carrying flags with swastikas, which predictably provoked brawls and made headlines in the newspapers. A student named Horst

Wessel was killed in one of those incidents and became the first martyr of Goebbels' National Socialists. In the elections to the Reichstag on May 20, 1928, the NSDAP won 2.6 percent, which was too little; nonetheless, twelve members of the party were allowed seats in the Reichstag. Their plan was to destroy democracy from within as enemies of the Weimar Republic. "Just as the wolf breaks into the flock of sheep, that's how we will come," Goebbels announced in the party newspaper *Angriff*.

Bonhoeffer later condemned a "faith" that Joseph Goebbels represented. For him, good was not useful, practical, and the Word of God was not an "idea." The Word of God respects the resistance and knows weakness. An idea, however, calls for "fanatics who do not know and respect resistance." Bonhoeffer believed that fanatics are afflicted with a "sick restlessness" that drives them not to rest until they realize their idea, achieve their goal - even if it means they have to walk over dead bodies.