

# Advent Week 3

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# REDEMPTION

## OPENING PRAYER

Holy One, you entered the world to bring us back to you, judging our wrongdoing yet coming as a child who brings grace for our stumbling ways and healing for our suffering. By your Spirit, help us to listen for your word of redemption, and in loving us, help us to love the world and all its peoples as you do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## OPENING QUESTIONS

1. As Bonhoeffer explores the idea of redemption, what are the dimensions of the redemption that God accomplished through Jesus?
2. How did Bonhoeffer understand the impact of redemption on his own life and decisions in the face of the Nazi regime?

## SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

In this chapter, Bonhoeffer explores the meaning of redemption, which is about how Jesus takes the guilt of humanity upon himself for us to experience the love and grace of God.

1. Jesus does not want to leave people in the guilt in which they are now living, he does not want some ideal “to triumph over the ruins of wrecked humanity.” “So, in vicarious responsibility for people and in his love for real human beings, Jesus becomes the one burdened by guilt...it is the love of God that makes Jesus become guilty. Out of selfless love for human beings, Jesus leaves his state as the one without sin and enters the guilt of human beings.” (34)

2. Bonhoeffer perceives how close Jesus comes to us, as near as a brother when we are lost in sin. Jesus' selfless love for human beings means he "enters into the guilt of human beings," but he is at the same time the guiltless one. The meditation provides a quote from his sermon for Advent Sunday (December 1928); a prayer for Jesus to come close to us in the midst of our evil and unfaithfulness, to "be my brother in the kingdom of evil and suffering and death." (36)
3. Exploring what it means for Christians to act in the world, he reflects on how we ourselves take on guilt through responsible action. "Everyone who acts responsibly becomes guilty." If this is not recognized, humans try to "remove themselves from the ultimate reality of human existence...and place their personal innocence above their responsibility for humankind. Through Jesus Christ, the nature of responsible action includes the idea that the sinless, the selflessly loving become the guilty." (38)
4. He asks the question, will we greet our redemption or resist it? "Christmas is coming—whether it is with us or without us depends on each and every one of us." He observes that Advent creates *new people*—this is addressed to "you whose gaze is fixed on this earth... you whose eyes are heavy with tears...you burdened with guilt..." For these people, the call comes: "Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (40)
5. God coming into the world in the manger is "the beginning of a complete reversal, a new ordering of all things on this earth." We "cannot simply sit there like spectators" but must "join in the action...and be drawn into this reversal of all things ourselves." What is going on here is world judgment and world redemption through the Christ child—the one who "pushes back the high and mighty, overturns thrones, ...he lifts what is the lowly, and makes it great and glorious in his mercy." (42)
6. Bonhoeffer recognizes that humans "are dehumanized by fear." But we "should not be afraid!" We know the hope of Jesus, "the One before whom the evil in us cringes, before whom fear and anxiety must themselves be afraid...the One who alone conquered fear, ...[who] nailed it to the cross...who is the victory cry of the humanity that is redeemed from the fear of death." Therefore, we can look to Christ in our fear. "Pray to him and believe that he is now with you and helps you." (44)
7. "God does not want people to be afraid—not even of the last judgment. Rather, he wants to let people know everything... He lets us know solely for one reason: so that we may find the way to Jesus Christ. He sends us the word of judgment only so that we will reach all the more passionately...for the promise of grace, so that we will know that we cannot prevail before God on our own strength... Christ judges, that is, grace is judge and forgiveness and love." (46)

## EXPLORING THE THEMES

In these meditations, Bonhoeffer articulates a way of understanding the redemption that is accomplished by Christ's birth as a child and his life and death as one fully human being but also the Son of God. Christ takes on guilt in confronting the realities of humanity's evil, suffering and death. "So, in vicarious responsibility for people and in his love for real human beings, Jesus

becomes the one burdened by guilt—indeed, the one upon whom all human guilt ultimately falls and the one who does not turn it away but bears it humbly and in eternal love.” (34) This is truly the good news of Advent which we await with anticipation. He writes, “Look up, you whose eyes are heavy with tears and who are heavy and who are crying over the fact that the earth has gracelessly torn us away... Look up, your redemption is drawing near.” (40)

For Bonhoeffer, both in these meditations and in his own life and theology, the redemption won for us by Christ implicates Christian discipleship as well. In his early writings and letters, he was already exploring ideas about how to live a Christian life in the real world,<sup>5</sup> a world which, for him, was dominated by the totalitarian and dangerous realities of the Nazi regime. In these meditations, he continues the theme of redemption and responsible Christian action in the world. Christians “cannot simply sit there like spectators... Rather, we must join in the action that is taking place and be drawn into this reversal of all things ourselves.” (42) Grounded in the understanding that Christ has redeemed us by entering into the guilt of humanity, the Christian is free to act responsibly in service to their neighbour and the world.<sup>6</sup>

The meditations this week show he is aware that by such actions, Christians themselves become guilty, “everyone who acts responsibly becomes guilty,” (38) which is why it is crucial that such responsible action is grounded in Christ’s redemption. In one of his writings from prison, he speaks of the one who “stands fast” as the one “called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God.”<sup>7</sup>

This ethical stance for a believer had real consequences in his own life. He took to heart his own words that Christians are called: “Serve your times, God’s present in your life. God has sanctified your time.” (14) In March 1943, he called the Confessing Church back to its mission and to keep alive “its responsibility for the world.” The church’s “experience will be that the world is in trouble and that the reign of Christ is not of this world, but precisely here it will be reminded of its mission to the world; otherwise it would become a religious club.”<sup>8</sup> This call helped a synod of the church take on the responsibility of speaking out against the murder of the Jews by the Nazis. For himself, his understanding of redemption and responsible action led to his decision to join the active resistance movement against Hitler that was operating underground among a few co-conspirators within the Nazi regime itself. “The ideas that Bonhoeffer was developing during this period bear the stamp of a sober awareness of his responsibility at that moment in history, in which every other consideration had to be subjected to the plans for the assassination [of Hitler].”<sup>9</sup>

One message of Advent that Bonhoeffer lifts up in these meditations is the urging not to be afraid, to overcome our fear in the joyful anticipation of the redemption that will be won by the child in the manger. One can only imagine that his own words might have been a comfort in prison, where both interrogation by the Gestapo and death as a resister were real and realized threats. He observes that while human beings can be “dehumanized by fear,” we should not be afraid because we can call on Jesus’ name. (44) Therefore, he says, “look to him in your fear. ...Pray to him and believe that he is now with you and helps you. The fear will yield and fade, and you will become free through faith in the strong and living Savior Jesus Christ.” (44)

## SCRIPTURE READING

Joshua 1:1-9

This reading from the book of Joshua continues the story of God's redemption of the people after their escape from slavery in Egypt, set just after the death of Moses, as Joshua was beginning to lead God's people into the land of promise. Composed to begin a theological history that leads through settling in the land and the monarchy (Joshua – 2 Kings), the reading picks up themes characteristic of the theology of the ancient writers: faithfulness to God, trust in God's word, and fearlessness in being God's people in the world. Consider how these Hebrew Bible themes are echoed in the understanding of redemption explored by Bonhoeffer.

## SUGGESTED SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

**Journaling:** These questions might get you started:

- In this chapter, which of Bonhoeffer's writings spoke to your heart most clearly? Why?
- How does Bonhoeffer's exposition of the meaning of redemption nurture your sense of God's love for you? How does it inspire your further reflections about God's calling in your life?

**Lectio Divina:** Use any of the biblical texts suggested by the Advent devotional, the biblical text suggested in this study Guide, or any portion of Bonhoeffer's words from the daily reading.

**Music as Spirituality:** For this week's theme of redemption, read or sing Hymn 658, "By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered." The words for this hymn come from a poem by Bonhoeffer himself, in one of the last three letters he wrote, written around Christmas time 1944, just months before he was executed. It was smuggled out of prison and later published and set to music.<sup>10</sup>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you engaged in any of the spiritual practices this week, share your thoughts about that with another person during the week or with your gathered study group. Consider how others found spiritual riches through the practice they chose. What do their practices add to your own spiritual engagement?
2. This week the study guide focuses on understanding Bonhoeffer's theology of redemption. However, there are other ways to consider the writings in this third chapter of *God is in the Manger*. What did you find most helpful in the readings for Week 3? Why were those elements of the Advent readings helpful for you?
3. What do you find most *helpful* and most *challenging* in Bonhoeffer's idea of redemption and how he lived it out?
4. Identify one thought from the readings about redemption this week that may have a positive impact on the life of the church and the life of your congregation. What do you find most helpful about it? In what ways may you encourage others through living out this idea from Bonhoeffer?

