

The Unbound Word

2 Timothy 2:1-13

On November 21, 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, from a cell in Tegel Prison, Berlin:

“Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent; one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other—things that are really of no consequence—the door is shut, and can be opened only from the outside.”

Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for his involvement in a conspiracy to smuggle Jews out of Germany and a failed plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. A Lutheran pastor in the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer refused to take the oath of loyalty to Hitler, an oath that, tragically, many other pastors did make. Bonhoeffer refused. His Christian faith kept him from pledging allegiance to a tyrant. That same Christian faith convinced him that Hitler was a monster either to be removed or destroyed. So, Bonhoeffer became involved in the conspiracy and was imprisoned for living out his Christian convictions in the Kingdom of the Left Hand. Eventually, he would be hanged for his “crimes” against the Third Reich. His words, however, were not imprisoned. So much of what we know about his life and thought comes from his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, written to his family and friends from prison. He ministered to the other prisoners and the guards, sharing with them the grace and love of God.

Christian writers have done their best work in prison. The line inscribed on Martin Luther King Junior’s memorial in Washington DC, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” is from his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, which has been described as “the most important written document of the Civil Rights Era.” In it he also wrote, “What

else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?” These words might have been penned by any number of imprisoned Christians since the time of the apostle Paul. John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress* while imprisoned. Charles Colson served as special counsel for President Richard Nixon, and was convicted of obstruction of justice for his role in the Watergate incident that led to the end of Richard Nixon’s presidency. His time in prison changed him, and he started Prison Fellowship, a Christian organization that ministers to prisoners. They were bound in prison for a time, but their words were unbound.

When Paul writes his second letter to Timothy, it’s part of what we call the Captivity Epistles. Paul writes his last letters – Philemon, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and 2 Timothy, from prison. There’s debate over where he is imprisoned – whether he’s still in Caesarea, or if it’s after he’s made it to Rome after appealing to Caesar to hear his case, or whether it’s his final imprisonment in Rome just before he is martyred. But while Paul is in prison or at least under house arrest, his movements are restricted and he cannot go where he wants to go. He is bound, perhaps even chained.

Paul was imprisoned, but his message wasn’t. He saw his imprisonment as his opportunity to preach to the guards and those around him. Once he was in Rome, he was guarded by the Praetorian Guard, the elite bodyguards of Caesar, those who had an influential effect on the movers and shakers of the empire. He was still able to write and receive visitors at varying times.

They can imprison Paul. They can kill Paul. But they can't imprison or kill God's Word. "The word of God is not bound." While Paul sits in prison, the Word of God runs free, and there's nothing the Praetorian Guard or anyone else can do to stop it.

The power of the Gospel had transcended Paul's own preaching of it. It wasn't up to Paul. It never had been. But now, as Paul sits in prison, he sees how God's word is at work, and continues to be at work. The fate of the Gospel doesn't rest on any one human messenger, no matter how important or influential. Paul was in prison, suffering. He'd dared to proclaim that Jesus Christ was Lord, and that meant that Nero was not the ultimate one in power. Speaking up against those in power leads to persecution, imprisonment, even death. But God was, and is, faithful, and Paul knew that this wasn't the end.

In Martin Luther's day, the word was bound by tradition. The people couldn't hear the word in their own language, but could only hear it in Latin. The printing press was just making books and pamphlets more common. Luther himself was bound by the knowledge he had of a judgmental God who he could only hope to appease. Yet it was once Luther was sent to the Scriptures, to the Word of God, that he discovered who God really was. He discovered that there was no way he could ever appease God on his own, but he didn't have to. Jesus already had done that on the cross.

Martin Luther, the founder of our movement in Christianity and whose reforming efforts we remember today, lived most of his life with a bounty on his head. Luther's work put him in opposition to the political and church leaders of his day, and so he ended up bound. Kings and emperors issued edicts and papers against

him. Popes published bulls banning him from the Catholic Church and condemning his writings. For over a year he was locked up. Not imprisoned, exactly, but forced to hide out in Wartburg Castle for his own protection. It was there that he translated the New Testament from Greek into German, the language of the people around him. Luther's time spent bound led to the word of God being unbound, spreading its way throughout Germany, and throughout the world.

Luther could have kept quiet and stopped preaching and writing. He could have lost his sense of humor and withdrawn from his friends. But instead, he doubled down and worked even harder. In one of my favorite Luther quotations, he said: "I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise, I did nothing. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my [friends], the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing: the Word did it all." Luther knew the power of God's word, and how it worked even without his effort.

As Paul waited, he knew the word was not bound, and that not even death would stop it. "If we have died with Jesus, we will also live with him." Resurrection, not death, gets the final word. Bonhoeffer knew the same thing. As he was led away to be hanged, his last words were "This is the end—for me, the beginning of life."

I want this confidence in God's Word. So often I think the Word needs my help. Paul holds the opposite view: set the Word loose and it will do its work. Preachers come and go. Preachers are jailed and killed. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8). Nothing you do can stop it. God's Word is unchained and

unstoppable. It will spread no matter what they do to you. Set it loose. Trust in it more than you trust yourself.

“There have been a great many attempts to bind the word of God, but yet it has not been bound,” said Charles Spurgeon. “The preacher is bound, but the word of God is not bound: the worker is feeble, but the word of God is not feeble. You are nothing and nobody, but the word of God cannot be said to be nothing and nobody: it is everything and everybody: it is girted about with all power.”

Nero, the Roman emperor at the time of Paul’s final imprisonment, was not the first to try to stamp out Christianity and God’s Word, nor was he the last. Persecution and attempts to suppress the truth of the Bible exist in many places today. Over 30 Chinese pastors were imprisoned over the last few weeks because they were leading underground churches seen as a threat to the Chinese Communist Party. Other pastors have been arrested in countries like Iran, India, Cuba, and Eritrea. Some have even been caught up in ICE raids in our country. In more than fifty countries of the world the Bible is either difficult to obtain, dangerous to own, or completely banned. Others still lack access to the Bible in their language.

While we may not suffer direct persecution where we live, there are those who disrespect and mock our beliefs and the Bible. I am encouraged to know that any effort to destroy or suppress the Word will never succeed. God’s purpose will be accomplished.

The key to the Christian life is not the level of our dedication to our goal—even non-Christians can be, and are, dedicated to their goals—but the recognition that our goal can only be attained by the power of God himself.

The grace of God creates faith in us, and the grace of God is the source of the power for the Christian life. This life is expressed through our various everyday vocations, and in those extraordinary circumstances when we, like Paul, may be called upon to suffer for the sake of the gospel. Remembering Jesus Christ and resting in his grace we remain confident that even when our faithfulness comes up short, God, who cannot be unfaithful to himself, remains faithful to his promise to forgive our sins for Jesus’s sake. God’s word is not bound. It sets us free. Thanks be to God for that.

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