



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Bonhoeffer: A Hero Then and Now- Part 1

**Guest(s):** Eric Metaxas

**Air Date:** July 21, 2021

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**Dr. James Dobson:** Hello, everyone. You're listening to Family Talk, a radio broadcasting ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. James Dobson. And thank you for joining us for this program.

**Roger Marsh:** If we look back throughout history, we can find countless stories of people with extraordinary faith standing up for what they believe. They serve as a great example for us today. And here at Family Talk, we know it's important to remember these heroes of the faith. So on today's program, we are bringing you a classic conversation featuring Dr. Dobson and Eric Metaxas, about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I'm Roger Marsh, and you're listening to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Many of us know about Dietrich Bonhoeffer because of his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Some of us know about him as a staunch opponent of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Well, today though, we are going to learn a little bit more about this great man's background before he started going toe to toe against the ideology of the Third Reich. Our guest today is Eric Metaxas. He's the well-known host of *The Eric Metaxas Show*. He's written numerous books for both adults and children. And is the New York Times bestselling author of *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. Let's listen now to Dr. Dobson and Eric Metaxas, as they introduce a hero of our faith right now.

**Dr. James Dobson:** I was very young when the war started and I realized something very dramatic was taking place. And I wanted to know more about it. I knew my parents were very upset about it. I remember in the little church that my dad pastored, there were a lot of men that were disappearing and some of them not coming back. And I remember my great grandmother looking up in the sky and seeing a plane go over and telling me that I needed to pray for the man in that plane. And I said, "Why? Is he going to crash?" And she said, "No, but he's a man that has a family and probably has children, and we just need to pray for him." I didn't know what she was really saying to me is that man's going to war. So all of that was buzzing in my head through childhood, and I just never got away from it, because it was such a dramatic time of life and time for the world.

And I look back and still can't believe that 6 million Jews were executed, and all the other things that took place during the war. And so today we're going to be

visiting with an expert on one of the particular heroic characters that emerged during that period. And I have been looking forward to this conversation with great anticipation for the reasons I just expressed. I'm speaking of Eric Metaxas, a man whose career is as varied and eclectic as they come. His bio captures it perfectly. Eric Metaxas has written for VeggieTales, Chuck Colson, and *The New York Times*. And rarely do you have those three entities expressed in the same sentence, but it's such a pleasure to have you here, Eric. I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you've done, especially in writing the book we're going to be talking about today.

Eric Metaxas: Well, let me tell you Dr. Dobson, in some ways, one of the best parts of writing this book is that I get to meet heroes of mine like Dr. James Dobson. It's just such an honor to be here with you and to get to talk about Bonhoeffer. What a joy I have to tell you, that God called me to write this book. God is using this book. It just absolutely thrills me. So thanks for having me.

Dr. James Dobson: This book has now become a runaway bestseller and the title of it is *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. And then he's also written another bestseller called, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*. Now you did not set out to be a historian, or writer of biography.

Eric Metaxas: No, I did not. I never had an ambition to write a biography. I'm a writer, as you can tell from my bio, I'm all over the map. I love doing all kinds of things. I'm one of these people that like to do everything once or twice, and just for the fun of it. And one thing I have to say is that I never thought I'd write a biography, but this is a case of God clearly leading me and calling me to do these two books. I don't believe that I'm called to write other biographies, but I was called genuinely to write these two books, the Wilberforce book I ended up, let's see, I wrote three books of Christian apologetics, fun Q&A called, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about God (But Were Afraid to Ask)*. And I was on CNN, of all places, talking about this book, *Everything You Wanted to Know about God (But Were Afraid to Ask)*.

And if you watch CNN, you will happen to notice that they don't have Christian apologists on every afternoon. And so I found myself in a strange position of talking about the big questions of scripture and whatever. And the host asked me a softball question, I was prepared for the hardball questions. She asked me to softball, she said, what is this about Wilberforce you mentioned here? And I had just a paragraph in my book to show that here's a man, William Wilberforce, who took the Bible so seriously that he changed the world. And so, I just mentioned it in the book and suddenly I'm on CNN talking to a national audience about Wilberforce, which led to a publisher saying, hey, there's a movie coming out called *Amazing Grace* about Wilberforce. Now I knew about the movie. Would you like to write a biography to come out when the movie comes out? Because people are going to watch the movie and they're going to say, we want to know more about Wilberforce.

And I prayed about it, it's one of those cases where the Lord really did speak to me and I said, okay, I will write this book, but I never would have dreamt that I'd write a biography. So I wrote the book, I enjoyed it. It was tough to do, but I enjoyed it, and it exercises my literary talents in a way that some of the other stuff I've done didn't. And then I go around the country talking about Wilberforce, and everybody would say to me, who are you going to write about next? I heard this question so often I said, look, if I ever were to write another biography, and I probably won't, there's only one person that really captured my heart and my mind the way Wilberforce did, and that man is Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dr. James Dobson: Where did you get that exposure to him?

Eric Metaxas: Well, yeah, that's interesting. It was the summer I came to faith, 1988, my dear friend Ed Tuttle, the man who led me to Christ was, we were talking one day. He hands me a copy of Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. And he says to me, oh, you went to Yale, you probably heard of Bonhoeffer. And I said, well, no, I went to Yale. So trust me, I've never heard of Bonhoeffer. Yale is secular that they're not exactly telling you about heroes as a faith. And so I said, who's Bonhoeffer? And he says, well, Bonhoeffer is a German pastor who, because of his faith in Jesus, stood up for the Jews, spoke out against the Nazis, and was killed in a concentration camp right before the end of the war. And I thought, are you kidding? I've never heard that story. And he told me a little bit more, and I read *The Cost of Discipleship*, and I was either a brand-new believer, or not even yet a believer, it was right around that time.

And I started reading *The Cost of Discipleship*, I was just stunned, because I had never encountered this kind of Christianity, hardcore, brilliant, authentic. I said, "This is extraordinary." And so it was filed in the back of my mind that somebody ought to do something about this. And, again, I don't know, I didn't say it earlier. My mom is German. My mother grew up, she's a little bit older than you, grew up in Germany. During this period, my father is Greek, grew up in Greece during World War II. So World War II has always haunted me. My parents are children of this era. They lived through the war, during the war, they were in war zones. My grandfather, my mom's dad, was killed in the war. He was a reluctant German soldier. So many were, you don't hear those stories. He would listen to the BBC with his ear literally pressed against the radio speaker, because if you were caught listening to the BBC in Germany, you get sent to the concentration camp.

And so, this whole period haunted me. When I heard about Bonhoeffer, I said, "Wow, here's a man, a German, who spoke up for the truth, who lived the truth, who spoke up for people like my grandfather and so many countless Germans." And obviously for millions of Jews, he was a voice because of his faith in Jesus Christ. That is amazing. The world needs to know about that, but I think that this is a story for us today that this inspires people deeply and that there are so many parallels. As I was writing the book so many people said to me as they've read it, what I was thinking when I was writing it, that there are these curious

and extraordinary parallels between what was happening then, and what was happening now. And you can make too much of that, but there are still very interesting parallels with how the church was asleep with many different things with the, you could look at the Nazis and that kind of fascism as a precursor of Islamofascism.

How does a Christian deal with that kind of evil? What's the biblical response? There's so many parallels and it's one of the reasons I think this book has done so well, because people realize that Bonhoeffer's voice back then is a voice for us today.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, there's always a place for courage in any era. And there's usually a shortage of people who have that characteristic. Now, Bonhoeffer wrote that book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, I believe, was it in 1935?

Eric Metaxas: Yeah. Around that time, I think it came out in '37, but it actually did well back then when he was, I think it was 1940 when he was already working for German military intelligence, and he spent some time at a Catholic monastery. And the monks were reading his *Cost of Discipleship*. And this is just a few years after it was published. So clearly it had an immediate impact. He was a brilliant theologian, and in some ways quite well-known even in his own lifetime.

Dr. James Dobson: Go back a little bit then, talk about his childhood. Where did he get that kind of character and courage?

Eric Metaxas: Well, you might not believe this, but when I, first of all, I should say I was quite ignorant of Bonhoeffer when I did the research, I said, "I don't know what I'm going to find. Maybe I'll find a man who at the end of his life slid off into some kind of secular humanist agnosticism," which many people have put forward, many liberal Bonhoeffer scholars and theological liberals have created a Bonhoeffer in their own image. And I say that they've hijacked Bonhoeffer for their own purposes and presented a Bonhoeffer who ultimately is not the real Bonhoeffer. They've only shown a side of him that they want to show. And so, I went in ignorant and saying, "I don't know what I'm going to discover." And I discovered absolutely the opposite about him, that he was faithful all the way till the end. We can talk about that later, but you asked me about the beginning of his life.

I was also ignorant of the beginning of his life, I said I have no idea who this guy is, what his family was like, like many great men, he may have arisen out of a vacuum. And you say, how did his parents produce this genius? Well, just the opposite. This man was the son of such extraordinary parents and raised in such an extraordinary family that I said, I've got to write about this family, because I said, when you encounter a family like this, it is no surprise that they produced, not just one, but a number of children, all of their children who were heroes, who were courageous, who spoke up for the right thing in the cases of two of them who died for the truth. Bonhoeffer's family to me is part of the key to who this man was. His father was the most famous psychiatrist in Germany for the

first half of the 20th century. So this was a major figure in German intellectual and medical and scientific circles. This is the father of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

His mother was a quite serious Christian who had roots in the Zinzendorf Moravian Herrnhut Movement. And his governesses were very serious believers. And so you have this incredible amalgam of the best of the world and the best of the church. And this young man was raised, well, even as a little boy, in a culture of a family where you were trained to think clearly. This is not about thinking with your emotions, if you have nothing to say, keep your mouth shut. And it's one of those things you say, what I would give to have been raised in this amazing family, because you saw that not only were they trained to think clearly, but they were also trained by these parents to do the right thing. You get that early on that they had a respect for other people. They were trained to put themselves second and to serve others. And this is part of the family culture. And that was one of my favorite parts of doing research, is discovering what a beautiful family he came out of.

Dr. James Dobson: And he went to seminary eventually. Where'd he go? And what do you think motivated him? Is it really a love for Christ?

Eric Metaxas: Well, initially, no, he was 13 years old when he knew he wanted to be a theologian, but it's unclear. It seems that he really wanted to distinguish himself in the academic world of theology. He was, of course, raised in Berlin, Berlin University was the place on planet earth, it's like growing up in the shadow of Caltech or MIT, and you want to study physics. This guy was raised in a neighborhood of some of the greatest theologians on planet earth. Now they were theologically liberal, but Bonhoeffer, again, the beauty of him is that he's intellectually honest and intellectually confident that even though he ends up not agreeing with them and the theological liberalism, he was confident and humble enough to learn from them, to speak their language, even if he ends up coming out in a different place.

So, he's 13 years old, decides he wants to be a theologian. At age 14 he announces this to the family. Now think that he waited a year, because in this family they'd rip you apart. "Oh, you want to be a theologian. You better know what you're saying before it comes out of your mouth." So he decides I want to be a theologian, but you get this idea that it's mainly an academic ambition, because they were all such geniuses and such academic. His brothers split the atom with Einstein, he was a physics guy. And his other brother was the head of the legal department of Lufthansa. So, whatever they did, they did on a high level. So you get the impression that he goes into theology with academic ambition. He goes to Berlin University and he just impresses. Now think of this, the theological liberal living legends of the day are trying to fight to get this guy to study under them because he's so impressive. He gets his doctorate at age 21, but here's the punchline is that he was a Bartian, he was absolutely not a theological liberal at the time.

And when you read in the book, I quote what he's writing at that time. And you can't believe how much he gets the gospel. He really gets the difference between dead religion and the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the punchline is that at 21, he gets his doctorate. And what is the question he's answering on this high theological level is "what is the church?" And in the course of these high theological academic efforts, he discovers that he has a love for the church, and he wants to be ordained as a minister. So not just to be an academic theologian, but also to serve God in the church, to teach Sunday school, to preach the gospel. So you get this beautiful combination of both of these things. And I think he probably really frustrated the theological liberals that were around him because he was so independent. And so clearly not one of them, but he spoke their language. He was respectful to them and gracious.

Sometimes people who are hardcore liberal in their outlook assume if you're brilliant you must be one of them, because conservatives are all jugheads, they're the people that listen to Dobson on the radio, those kinds of people, right? So they can't be so smart. So if you're smart, obviously you're not part of that worldview. You must be one of us secretly. Right? Well, Bonhoeffer was not. And I think that part of that too, is that they were sure that they could get him. These guys are, I guess, in their seventies, these are living legends in the world of theology. And he's frustrating them because he resists their entreaties, "come under my wing young man." He wouldn't do that, because he was raised under the great Carl Bonhoeffer's father. And so he had confidence and a real independence intellectually. So you could see how he probably frustrated these theological liberals.

There are people out there that from early on they're geniuses, and our only question is, are they going to use their genius for the Lord and for God's purposes? But Bonhoeffer was a genius. Now his whole family were geniuses, but he was a genius. And when a 13-year-old like Bonhoeffer says, "I want to be theologian." This is not just some crazy idol thing. He really meant it. To be fair his mother's father and his mother's grandfather were respected theologians. His mother's grandfather was a big deal theologian. So this was part in the background, not so much on the father's side, but on his mother's side, you see it there. And he took off in their direction. But yeah, Bonhoeffer was someone who knew what he wanted. He was very serious. You can just see that even at 13 or 14, even to talk about theology, it's funny to us, but he knew that this is what he wanted to do. It's an extraordinary thing.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's fast forward in the interest of time to 1933, when something happened that literally changed the world for the worst. It was one of the darkest events in the 20th century. Describe it, and what effect did it have on Bonhoeffer?

Eric Metaxas: Well, to really explain what happened in '33, I'll say what happened just before that. Bonhoeffer, before he got ordained as a minister, because you had to wait till you're 25, decided to spend a year in New York City, that's where I live with my wife and daughter, decides to go to New York. Now he'd gotten his doctorate at age 21 from the greatest place in the world you could study

theology. So, for him at age 24 to go to New York and to spend some time at Union Theological Seminary, which was theologically liberal, was not a big deal for him. I think he just wanted to experience New York and America, but what happened to him that year had nothing to do with Union really, except for the fact that a fellow student at Union, an African-American from Alabama named Frank Fisher invites Bonhoeffer to visit an African-American church in Harlem.

Bonhoeffer goes with him and sees, I think for the first time in his life, the full gospel of Jesus Christ. He sees a congregation, African-American congregation in 1930, who were no strangers to suffering, let's face it. And they were not merely being religious. They weren't just going through the motions of cultural Christianity. They were worshiping Jesus Christ. There was fiery gospel preaching. These people lived the faith. Bonhoeffer was so moved by this that, what I really say in the book, and I say when I'm talking about Bonhoeffer, this changed his life. Somehow he went from being merely academically and theologically ambitious to wanting to be disciple of Jesus Christ. So when he goes back to Germany, just at this time that you mentioned, he's a different man, his friends noticed this, that somehow he's more serious about God. So fast forward to 1933, you just mentioned it. January 31<sup>st</sup>, Adolf Hitler becomes the chancellor of Germany, becomes the führer. Now Bonhoeffer...

Dr. James Dobson:

Against all odds really.

Eric Metaxas:

The whole thing is unbelievable. And I try to write about this in the book so people get the context, because most people aren't students of World War II as you are Dr. Dobson, but this really was one of those quirks, these freakish moments, and how many people at the time were sure it couldn't last. This guy is Adolf Hitler, he's a vulgarian. He may be, he'll be in there for a couple of years, but there's no way that this is going anywhere, but somehow Bonhoeffer knew from the get-go that this is a dark day for Germany and we must speak out right now. We've got to take a stand. And two days after Hitler becomes chancellor Bonhoeffer goes on the radio and gives a famous speech where he pretty much says that, that kind of leader is a misleader. He is misleading the people into idol worship. It's not God's idea of leadership. God's idea of leadership is servant leadership, is authority submitted to the authority of God. And right out of the gates, Bonhoeffer is on a collision course with the Nazis.

Dr. James Dobson:

It is amazing to me that he had the courage to do that because Hitler was even then a snake. A lot of people didn't understand what it was, but he killed a lot of the men that put him in power.

Eric Metaxas:

Of course.

Dr. James Dobson:

That were his friends, just because they were rivals. And he could have taken Bonhoeffer down with just a word.

Eric Metaxas: Well, the thing is that, I guess I thought that going into this I was wondering how did Bonhoeffer escape that? But when you look at it more deeply, you realize it's much more nuanced and complicated. In other words, the kind of dictatorship that Hitler had in '33, or '34, '35, was not the kind of dictatorship you have, for example, in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which he just needs to look in your direction and you're dead. There was still a veneer of legality. It still was complicated. Bonhoeffer was the son of the super famous German hero, Carl Bonhoeffer. So in some ways he had some protection. He always spoke in a measured way. He never said Hitler is the enemy, whatever. And so you realize it's complicated and there's a lot more gray area in a way. Hitler could not be nakedly aggressive. He had to always cloak it somehow. And Bonhoeffer was canny enough to avoid trouble until literally 1944.

Dr. James Dobson: Eric, this program is so short, it just makes me sick, but you come all the way from New York to be here. And we're just going to continue to talk if that's all right with you, we'll record what you say, and then we will air it next time. But the next part of the story is absolutely fascinating in how he took on one of the most evil empires in the history of the world and knew, he knew it was going to cost him.

Eric Metaxas: Amen.

Dr. James Dobson: There was no doubt that it would eventually bring him down.

Eric Metaxas: Well, I'm happy to talk as long as you'll have me until I need to go to the airport. I'm yours. So thank you.

Dr. James Dobson: Thanks for being with us, Eric, we appreciate you. The book is *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* by Eric Metaxas, and let's keep talking.

Eric Metaxas: Thank you.

Roger Marsh: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life is an example of fighting for what's true and what's right, even if it's uncomfortable or costly. You just heard the first half of a classic conversation between Dr. Dobson and author, speaker and radio host, Eric Metaxas on today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. Now visit our broadcast page at [drJamesdobson.org/broadcast](http://drJamesdobson.org/broadcast), to learn more about Eric Metaxas, his radio program and his many books, that's [drjamesdobson.org/broadcast](http://drjamesdobson.org/broadcast). And you can always give us a call as well. Our toll-free number is (877)-732-6825. We're happy to answer any questions you might have about the broadcast, or the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Now, Dr. Dobson has a special message that he'd like to share with you, doctor.

Dr. James Dobson: Before we end this program, I want to remind you that right now is a great time to partner with us at James Dobson Family Institute. Every dollar you give will be doubled thanks to a very generous matching grant. This match will stay in place until we've hit our target. I hope you will stand with us in our fight for marriages



and families. If you are able to support us, know that any amount that you give will have a major impact on the people that we're able to reach. Learn how you can partner with us and participate by going to [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org), or call (877)-732-6825. That's (877)-732-6825.

Roger Marsh:

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We want to equip you to think critically and biblically about what's going on in our nation so that you can understand the truth and then get involved. Now to sign up for the public policy emails, go to [drJamesdobson.org/policy](http://drJamesdobson.org/policy). These emails are free by the way, for you to receive. That's [drjamesdobson.org/policy](http://drjamesdobson.org/policy). And make sure you join us again tomorrow to hear the riveting conclusion of Dr. Dobson's conversation with Eric Metaxas about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Until then, from all of us here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for listening today to Family Talk.

Announcer:

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.