Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Bonhoeffer: A Hero Then and Now – Part 2
Guest(s): Eric Metaxas
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Dr. James Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk. The broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, and on today's program, we're going to revisit a special conversation Dr. Dobson had with New York Times best-selling author Eric Metaxas. Now, Eric Metaxas has written some fascinating works, and one of his most recent that was also one of his most popular was the biography that he wrote about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The book called *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* was a big hit with our listeners here at Family Talk and in honor of the fact that the new Bonhoeffer movie is still in theaters and still in the top 10 we're rebroadcasting this conversation again so you can learn a little bit more about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and also so you'll support the movie as well. Dr. And Mrs. Dobson have seen Bonhoeffer. They were moved dramatically by this powerful and emotional presentation of the life of this famed theologian and we encourage you this weekend while it's still in theaters to go see the Bonhoeffer movie. Now let's continue with part two of Dr. Dobson's conversation with author Eric Metaxas talking about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, Eric, the program that we did together last time absolutely fascinated me. Every word that you spoke was of interest to me. And we're talking about the book again, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. And this is a book that I strongly recommend to our listeners out there. In fact, Eric, this is nearly a 600 page book. I mean, this is a tremendous work of passion and-

Eric Metaxas: Well, I got to tell you the one good thing as an author ... You talk about music to your ears. I have heard literally hundreds of times people say to me, "I couldn't put it down. I was initially daunted by the size, but once I got into it, I couldn't put it down." I've heard that literally hundreds of times. And as a writer, that's your dream come true for people to say that I couldn't put it down. But I think that this story is so undeniably fascinating that you can't put it down because you want to find out what happens next, what happens next, and you can't help but feeling what would I do if I were there. If I were there, would I have the courage that he had? And we say courage, but it's really faith. If you have the

kind of faith that he had, it leads naturally to courage and I think we don't want to divorce one from the other. That's an important point.

Dr. James Dobson: Boy, you look death squarely in the face though. The Nazis were born killers. I mean they were, and if you crossed them, you died and usually died in a very violent way. We started last time with the early days of Bonhoeffer's life and about his decision to go to seminary and then to become a pastor and the other things that he did. We got up to about 1933 when Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, and he began to be an irritant to the Nazis from the beginning. He wrote his dissertation, or I'm not sure how it was published, on the subject the church and the Jewish question.

Eric Metaxas: Well, that was an essay. Yes. He wrote an essay because early on, as soon as the Nazis took over, 1933, they were ruthless and they were taking over all of the society. All of it. Now, that's what totalitarians do. They take over the totality of society. They reorder everything according to their ideology. What Bonhoeffer's specific ability was, was that he could see when you cross a small line where you're headed. And I have spoken publicly about this HHS mandate, religious liberty. Bonhoeffer at the time saw this kind of thing and nobody else seemed to see it. They said, "Well, it's not good, but it's not as bad as you say." He somehow could see where this is headed. And he saw the principles that when you cross a line and when you compromise a principle, you're dead. And Bonhoeffer saw right at that point when he writes this essay on the church and Jewish question, this is one of those moments where the church is being bullied by the government to say that you will define the German church along racial lines. So no Jews allowed.

Now, in Germany at that time, there were tons of Jewish people who had been going to church all their lives. They considered themselves Protestant, German Christians who had maybe Jewish blood or their grandfather was Jewish, but they were members of the church and Lutherans and so on and so forth. And the Nazis say, "No. We've got to be racially pure. We've got to be pure German." And Bonhoeffer sees this as a moment where if the church compromises on this ... And it's hard for us to believe, but so many at the time thought, "Well, this is not such a big deal, is it?" Bonhoeffer says, "If you do not see that this is a bright line, that if this line is crossed we are dead, the church will have compromised and it will be over. We need to hold this line at all costs."

So Bonhoeffer is saying to his fellow pastors at the time, "If we allow the Nazis to bully us on this issue, the church is no longer the church." And so he writes this famous essay, The Church and the Jewish Question, and it caused controversy in his day. Many German Christians said, "Oh, this is too much. You've gone too far. Take it easy, Pastor Bonhoeffer." But he said, "No. This is where the facts lie." Again, the son of the great Carl Bonhoeffer. He said, "This is where the evidence and the facts lead, and we must face facts that if we don't take a stand now, we will be forever compromised and it becomes increasingly difficult to take stands. The more you give up, the tougher it gets."

Dr. James Dobson: Well, what was the reaction to that essay?

Eric Metaxas: Well, as I said earlier, it caused division. There were many pastors that thought he'd gone too far. Because what he says in that essay, and all of this is of course in the book, but I mentioned that Bonhoeffer says, "Look, the role of the church is to call the state to accountability. Is the state being legitimate in its actions?" Because we know the state has a legitimate sphere and that's a biblical idea, but when does it cross that line? When does it go too far? So number one, it's the role of the church to stand up to the state and to cause the state to be legitimately doing what it's supposed to be doing. But secondly, to basically ... How does he put it? To stand up for the victims of the state. Now, if the state is bullying people or some minority, in this case Jews, he says it's the role of Christians, the church to stand up for those victims, including Jews.

And when he said including Jews, it really pushed a lot of the Christians back. They said, "Really? Is it's the role that we're supposed to put our necks on the line for people outside the church?" And Bonhoeffer says, "Yes. Scripturally, we're obliged to do that." And then thirdly, he says the most dramatic thing. He says, "And if necessary, it is the role of the church to try to thwart the aims of the state." That is if the state is abusing people and bullying minorities, whether it's Catholics or Jews or whoever it is, it is the role of everyone in the church to try to work against that. And of course, he meant whether politically or in other ways. And this was very dramatic for Germans who had a kind of cozy relationship with the state and they couldn't even imagine standing up against the state.

God always has His prophets and they always speak and they call the church to be the church. In the Old Testament, they call the people of God to be the people of God. And usually the people of God do not respond. And then it's in a generation or several generations later say, "Hey, wasn't Isaiah great?" Yeah, but in his day. And I think that part of the reason I get excited about the story of Bonhoeffer is because I believe the Lord's giving us a second chance. That Bonhoeffer's cry was not heeded in his day. But I think that in a sense that people's new familiarity with the story of Bonhoeffer can wake up the church today to say, "We must not make the same mistake now." And I've been mocked on the blogs or whatever for comparing what is happening now to what was happening in the '30s. And if you really look at what I'm saying, there's a clear parallel. You don't have to follow it all the way to the death camps, you just have to follow it to 1935.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. It's important that you do address that because there'll be people who will hear the conversation that we have just spoken and will say, "Hey, what he's doing is he's comparing our government with Nazis." And that's not what you're saying.

Eric Metaxas: No. I've been on the record a number of times in saying that that's not the case. I think sometimes too that there's a kind of an arrogance that we think, "Oh, we would never do what the Germans did in the 1930s." Well, if you're a Christian,

you need to know that we have just as much original sin in us as Americans, as Germans did in the 1930s. We're just as capable of self-deception and error, and maybe we'll make a different kind of mistake, but we're capable of making grievous, horrific mistakes, and so we ought not to dismiss that period as some kind of aberration. Why should we do that? Biblically speaking, we're just as capable of messing it up.

Dr. James Dobson: I don't know if I can express this clearly, but let me try. There are people today who look around and see the evil that's taking place in this country and are saying, "Well, God's in control." Well, God was in control in Nazi Germany too.

Eric Metaxas: Yeah. God was in control for 70 years of Soviet communism.

Dr. James Dobson: Absolutely. I mean, the Lord will allow the people to do evil. The Jewish people demanded a king and he gave them Saul. If we don't follow the precepts of scripture, it can happen to us too.

Eric Metaxas: Well, that's the thing is that if you haven't suffered ... And let's face it, most Americans have never been through ... We don't even know what it is to lack religious freedom, so we don't even talk about religious freedom because we've never known a world without it. We take it completely for granted. We've been a blessed country economically in every other way, and we cannot imagine things getting really bad. Well, we better imagine it. And I sometimes think that again, the story of Bonhoeffer can wake us up that wonderful people lived through this era. This is not a myth. This is not a novel. This actually happened. There are many people alive today who remember it, and we need to understand that we are no different and we can go down the same kind of path.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, let's, again, fast-forward to we'll say 1935. We were talking last time about The Cost of Discipleship, which is the book that Bonhoeffer wrote. And I would think that by that time there was pressure on him and threats to his life and that life had become pretty uncomfortable.

Eric Metaxas: Bonhoeffer, again, he was very canny and in some ways he was protected because of who he was, and he could get away with things that others couldn't. So he pushed it as far as it could go. First of all, he was involved in the church battle. He wasn't involved directly in government issues, but the church battle that the Nazi attempt to take over the German church, he was in the thick of that fighting. And obviously I write about that in my book. But then in the latter part of the '30s, you see that the Nazis begin more and more to get power and more and more to pay attention to this young man, Bonhoeffer, that he's a troublemaker, that he's speaking out. So they forbid him from conducting this illegal seminary because he ran an illegal seminary for the confessing church for a number of years.

They forbid him from speaking publicly. Finally, they prohibit him from publishing because he wrote a book on the Psalms. Now, keep this in mind. You

can't even believe this, but the Nazis were trying to create a German state church that was utterly devoid of all Jewish elements. Good luck with that project because I don't know how you're going to pull that off. Bonhoeffer, he was in the thick of this, but he was a real troublemaker in the best sense that he would just push and push and push. By 1939, the war was coming and Bonhoeffer is asking the Lord, "What do I do now? I can no longer teach. I can no longer speak publicly. I can no longer publish. Lord, what are you calling me to do?" And he felt that since the war is coming, there's no way he could pick up a gun and fight in Hitler's war.

He knew his conscience would not allow him to fight in a war of aggression. He was not a pacifist the way he's sometimes been painted, but he knew I'm not going to fight in Hitler's war, so what can I do? Well, he decides to go back to America and he has all kinds of people pull strings, Reinhold Niebuhr and all these big wigs pull strings so the brilliant Bonhoeffer can come to America and teach and really weather the storm that's coming. But no sooner does he get on the ship to America in June of 1939 than he knows that somehow he's made a mistake, that he's missed God. He does not have the peace of God. He spends 26 days in New York City before he gets on another ship and goes back into the belly of the beast, into danger, into harm's way. And the question of course is what is he thinking?

What's he going to do? Well, he didn't have a death wish. He wanted to obey God and what he felt the Lord was calling him to do, and this is where it gets crazy, he officially joins the conspiracy against Adolf Hitler. So to preserve the illusion that he's serving the Third Reich in time of war. Because probably they had an idea that, well, it's war. So even troublemakers like Bonhoeffer, they're going to get with the program to defend the Fatherland. So what he really does though is he gets hired by his brother-in-law to join German military intelligence, which looks legitimate, but in fact, what he was going to do was participate with his brother-in-law and other members of German military intelligence in this vast conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler. It's an amazing thing. And part of what his job was to travel to neutral countries to make contact with the Churchill government, for example, to let them know there are Germans inside Germany working against the Nazis, and will you help us? And so that's what he ends up doing.

Dr. James Dobson: So he could have stayed in America and avoided the dark road that led to his execution.

Eric Metaxas: That's exactly right. He could have done it and-

Dr. James Dobson: And he deliberately came back knowing what it was going to cost.

Eric Metaxas: Well, the chapter-

Dr. James Dobson: Talk about the cost of discipleship. He was living it out.

Eric Metaxas: He lived it out. And listen, he preached this from the beginning when he said, "When Christ bids a man, he bids him to come and die, that we are called to die to self." Now, do we take that lightly? I mean, if you're really a believer, you have to understand that God calls you to die to self and to die to self means to say, "Lord, whatever you want, I trust you. I trust you. I know you love me, and I can trust you." And Bonhoeffer was in that place. And so he goes to America and he is ... I quote a lot of his journals and his letters from this period in the chapter about this, because you can see him wrestling with the Lord and saying, "Lord, you've got to speak to me. I don't know what to do. You must speak to me. And if you speak, I will obey." And at some point he feels the Lord is saying to him, go back. And so he goes back knowing that he's doing what the Lord calls him to do. And anytime you really know that the Lord has called you to do something, you have the peace of God. That's the only way to live. And so he goes back into this dangerous situation. And as we know in 1943, he was arrested and the story goes on from there.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. It reminds me of Jesus walking the Jericho Road knowing that he was going to Jerusalem and what was going to happen to him there. And he willingly walked that road. And in some ways Bonhoeffer did the same thing. Now, when did he go to prison? When did they really come down on him?

Eric Metaxas: Yeah. So he's operating as a member of German military intelligence right under their noses. Kind of looking like he's being a good German, he's doing his job and stuff. And during this period, the Gestapo begins to sense that the Abwehr, which was really the German military caste, many members of which were not on board with the Nazis. So they're going along, but the Gestapo begins to smell something's fishy so they're tapping phones, and they finally catch Bonhoeffer because of his involvement in a plot to get seven Jews out of Germany into neutral Switzerland. So it was not the plot to kill Adolf Hitler. That had not yet been discovered. But in '43, Bonhoeffer's arrested for Operation Seven to get these seven Jews out of Germany and into Switzerland, and he's sent to Tegel Military Prison. But again, this was not the Gestapo prison. He was treated reasonably well at Tegel. He's able to function as a pastor in the prison, counseling the guards and other prisoners.

Dr. James Dobson: What year was that?

Eric Metaxas: This was 1943. And he has genuine hope that he's going to get out. He has genuine hope that either the war will end or the conspirators will defeat Hitler or his case will come to trial and he'll win the case. He really had hope. He gets engaged during this time, right before he's arrested. They're planning their wedding and so on and so forth. But what happens, of course, is in July of '44, he's still in prison and the Valkyrie plot goes awry. We know that the suitcase bomb under the table blows up, Hitler survives. And for the first time now the conspiracy is exposed and thousands are arrested, thousands are tortured. Names come up, and one of the names at the top of the list is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. So from that point on, July 20th, 1944, he is known to be not just a

general troublemaker, but here's a man known to be involved in the top level of this plot to kill the Fuhrer. So from this point on, his days are numbered.

Dr. James Dobson: Eric, there is so much here. I mean, it's just breathtaking to me that we could do many programs on it. But let's go to the last days of Bonhoeffer's life. He's now in prison. The name of the prison was-

Eric Metaxas: Well, first it was Tegel Military Prison. Then he's transferred to the dreaded Gestapo prison for a number of months.

Dr. James Dobson: And he was sentenced to death by Hitler himself, wasn't he?

Eric Metaxas: Well, this is one of these strange cases, and the end of the book in some ways is my favorite part of the book because it's this strange, almost surreal journey that he goes on. Germany is getting thinner and thinner as the allies on the one side and the Soviet army on the other side are narrowing and narrowing Germany. And so he has to be transferred from the Gestapo prison to Buchenwald because Berlin is being bombed to smithereens. And he's in Buchenwald for two months and then he's finally-

Dr. James Dobson: That's a concentration camp.

Eric Metaxas: Yes. But he was in sort of a prison barracks right outside the camp. And then he is transferred into a van. And in the last week of his life, really it's a surreal thing like out of a dreamscape where these guards are taking these very high-level prisoners who are really probably going to be used as bargaining chips if the war ends. So his life was not known to be in danger until about a day before he's sentenced to death. It was April 8th that he is taken away from these elite prisoners where on the express orders of Adolf Hitler or Himmler we're not sure, he was sent to Flossenberg concentration camp, and there was what's called a drum court military trial. He's sentenced to death. And at dawn on April 9th, he's hanged by the Nazis, but the crematorium at Flossenberg, which I have visited, was broken so he was burned. His body was burned in a pile just as the other Jewish victims of the Nazis would have been burned. And I think Bonhoeffer would've been honored to be counted among the victims of the Nazis to identify publicly with the Jews who were killed in this way.

Dr. James Dobson: Did he write anything in the last week or two or say anything?

Eric Metaxas: Yes. We do know ... All this is in the book where I talk about everything we know. There's a guy named Payne Best, who was this very colorful British figure who was traveling with Bonhoeffer. He was a prisoner, something in the Venlo incident in the late '30s. He'd been in and out of concentration camps. And this guy wrote an account of this period. And so from his account, we know exactly what happened to Bonhoeffer in the last days of his life. And one thing we know ... Two things we know. First of all, he was witnessing to an atheist, trying to teach him about Christianity. And we also know that Bonhoeffer conducted a

service and preached a sermon from Isaiah. 18 hours before he went to his death with his fellow prisoners, he conducted a service as a pastor. So it's such a moving picture of the last days of his life.

Dr. James Dobson: And he knew he was going to be dying?

Eric Metaxas: At this point, he did not yet know. It was right at the end of the sermon on Isaiah that there's a knock at the door, and these gentlemen come in and they say, "Mr. Bonhoeffer, come with us." And that's when he knew I'm going to my death. And he says to one of the gentlemen there, "This is the end, but for me, the beginning of life." He knew where he was going.

Dr. James Dobson: Eric, we're out of time, but tell us what the bottom line is. What stands out to you from the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer having lived with him for ... I don't know how long it took you to write this, but you became absorbed with it. What is the most important thing, the salient issue?

Eric Metaxas: Well, I would say for him it was his absolute focus on being an obedient disciple of Jesus Christ and understanding that there is no halfway. That either you have died to self and trust God and know him and give him everything, or you're just talking about it. You're being merely religious. You're just a churchgoer. Bonhoeffer understood that to die to self is to be a disciple. And that's when he talks about religionless Christianity. It's not about dead religion. It's about a faith where Jesus is Lord over everything, over every part of you. It doesn't mean you're religious. It means you're fully human, redeemed by Jesus, that He's alive and operating in you. And Bonhoeffer lives this, and it's one of the reasons I think his story is so compelling because we often don't see this. He had a deeply authentic faith that would be a model for any of us.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you believe that we in the 21st century could also be called to radical discipleship?

Eric Metaxas: I think that every human being who has ever lived is called to the same kind of life as Bonhoeffer was. The Lord doesn't say, "Well, he's a special guy and he gets to be really special to me." If the Lord's no respective person, it means anyone created in his image is fallen, and the Lord invites us to die to self and to enter into a living relationship with him. And to me, the story of Bonhoeffer is one of the Lord's ways of saying to us, "This is what I have for you. Give me everything you have. Who knows what I can do with you?" I did the same thing in the Wilberforce book. When you see when God gets control of a life, who knows what can happen? And there's not a person who can hear my voice now, there's not a person on the planet for whom this is not God's will.

Dr. James Dobson: I wish I could say I would've walked the path that Bonhoeffer walked. I don't know if I could have, but I wish I could.

Eric Metaxas: Well, God gives us grace. Anybody who says, "Oh yeah, I would've done that.", it's like Peter saying, "Oh Lord, I'll never ..." I mean bravado and that only goes so far. The humility of knowing that we probably would have failed, maybe that's the first sign that the Lord can use us.

Dr. James Dobson: Eric Metaxas, who has written this incredible book, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. And I recommend it strongly to all of our listeners.

Eric Metaxas: Thank you.

Roger Marsh: And that concludes Dr. James Dobson's insightful conversation with bestselling author Eric Metaxas today here on Family Talk. Their topic of conversation, Eric's New York Times best-selling book called *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. We have information on the book up at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And keep in mind we revisited this discussion today here on Family Talk as an encouragement for you to go see the new Bonhoeffer movie while it is still in theaters and it should be in theaters all throughout this weekend. It's been in the top 10 ever since its release just a couple of weeks ago.

Now in the closing moments of today's program, the advent season is in full swing, and today is actually day two of a special 12-day devotional series created by JDFI's own Dr. Owen Strachan, who's the senior director of the Dobson Culture Center. Of course, the reason for the season that we're celebrating right now is Jesus Christ. He's the center of the Christmas story and in the brand new, specially created advent series available for you right now at drjamesdobson.org, you can take a 12-day devotional approach to Christ's coming where Dr. Strand explores the Christmas story in all its beauty and difficulty and delight. This is a unique series that's perfectly suited for families. It comes in an easy to read format, and also a short teaching video for each day's devotion. Now, the devotional series is free. All you have to do is go sign up for it. Go to drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org, and click the icon for the brand new 12 day devotional series, The Approach to Christ's Coming. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org for the brand new 12 day devotional, the advent series that you'll want to use for your entire family all throughout the Christmas season. If you sign up for it today and get it today, you can do all 12 days and land this whole program on Christmas Day.

And finally, as we bring today's broadcast to a close, keep in mind you can get your copy of our 2024 edition of the Best of Broadcast Collection, a six CD set or digital download that features the most requested programs of the past 12 months. Now, we'll be happy to send it to you as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute today. And keep in mind, because of a special matching grant, your gift will be doubled. Go to drjamesdobson.org and give a gift through our secure website or call our resource center at 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825. Remember, our special December match means any donation you make today will be doubled.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh. On behalf of Dr. James Dobson and all of us here at the JDFI, thanks so much for listening. Join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

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