



I don't know about you, but when I'm in a place of pain or distress, my prayer life can go one of two ways. Either I can feel closer to God, and prayer comes more easily, or my prayer life dries up and any kind of communication with God feels impossible. It is in these moments that we are often encouraged to seek prayer and inspiration in other ways, but what do you do when you feel that nothing is inspiring you?! Three years ago, when I was in that predicament, I discovered the prayers of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (thanks to the YOUCAT publication "the Youth Prayer Book"). At the time, I didn't feel that I could pray in my own words- I didn't have the words to express my feelings. But other people's prayers- the saints and even the psalms- felt a little out of my reach. If I couldn't pray in my own words, Bonhoeffer's words were the next best thing I could find!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran theologian, writer and university lecturer who was imprisoned by the Nazis and eventually executed in 1945, in the last months of the Second World War. Even if you don't know much about Bonhoeffer, as was the case for me when I first discovered his prayers, his character shines quietly through his words. **What I love about these prayers is his honesty.** He doesn't pretend with God that everything is fine. He is starkly open about just how bleak his situation is. Yet- and this is the important part- he does not leave things there. Bonhoeffer must have known the truth that death does not have the final word. Christ has the final word, and Bonhoeffer's prayers turn everything over to God so that comfort and strength is found in the paradox of suffering.

**Bonhoeffer wrote the prayer "Who Am I" while he was in prison,** and though the subject matter is probably far more dramatic than most of us will ever experience in our lifetime, there is much in it that is recognisable. We all know the exhaustion of keeping up appearances, the pain of feeling trapped in a job we hate, the grind of routine that gets us down. It is a prayer-poem that is an outpouring of seemingly unsolvable despair, until the last line redeems it all. In praying it, I found an outlet for my own despair, and a

solid conviction that my messy life was held together in the hands of God.

**The three prayers are perfect for praying throughout the day**, with a “Morning Prayer” and an “Evening Prayer” and the “Who Am I” prayer that could be squeezed into a lunch break or another suitable moment. They have also been set to music, and the “Evening Prayer” is included here, sung in a beautiful arrangement by a choral group at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

If you are struggling to pray, we hope that these prayers will be a new beginning for you.

### **Morning Prayer**

O God, early in the morning I cry to you.

Help me to pray

And to concentrate my thoughts on you:

I cannot do this alone.

In me there is darkness,

But with you there is light;

I am lonely, but you do not leave me;

I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help;

I am restless, but with you there is peace.

In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;

I do not understand your ways,

But you know the way for me...

Restore me to liberty,

And enable me to live now

That I may answer before you and before me.

Lord, whatever this day may bring,

Your name be praised.

Amen

### **Who am I?**

They often tell me

I stepped from my cell's confinement

Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,

Like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me

I used to speak to my warders

Freely and friendly and clearly,

As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me

I bore the days of misfortune

Equally, smilingly, proudly,

Like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?

Or am I only what I myself know of myself?

Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,

Struggling for breath, as though hands were

compressing my throat,  
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,  
Tossing in expectation of great events,  
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?  
Who am I? This or the other?  
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?  
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,  
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?  
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!

### **Evening Prayer**

O Lord my God,  
thank you for bringing this day to a close.  
Thank you for giving me rest  
in body and soul.  
Your hand has been over me

and has guarded and preserved me.

Forgive my lack of faith

and any wrong that I have done today,

and help me to forgive all who have wronged us.

Let me sleep in peace under your protection,

and keep me from all the temptations of darkness.

Into your hands I commend my loved ones.

I commend to you my body and soul.

O God, your holy name be praised.

Amen.