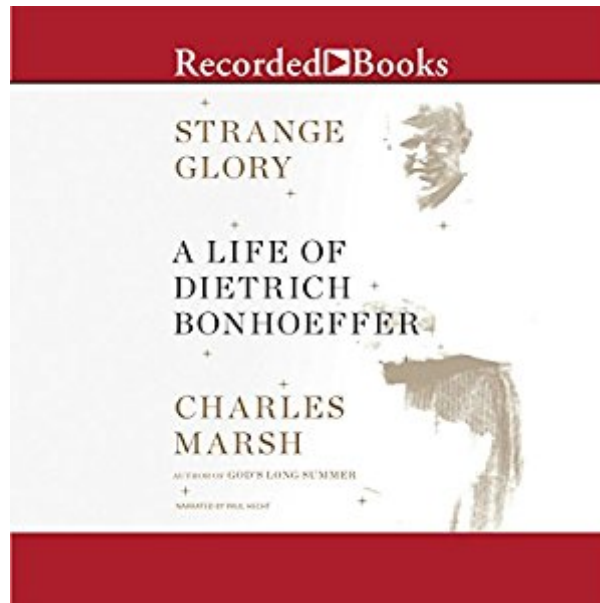




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Strange Glory: A Life Of Dietrich Bonhoeffer



Synopsis

In the decades since his execution by the Nazis in 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor, theologian, and anti-Hitler conspirator, has become one of the most widely read and inspiring Christian thinkers of our time. Now, drawing on extensive new research, *Strange Glory* offers a definitive account, by turns majestic and intimate, of this modern icon. The scion of a grand family that rarely went to church, Dietrich decided as a 13-year-old to become a theologian. By 21, the rather snobbish and awkward young man had already written a dissertation hailed by Karl Barth as a "theological miracle". But it was only the first step in a lifelong effort to recover an authentic and orthodox Christianity from the dilutions of liberal Protestantism and the modern idolatries of blood and nation - which forces had left the German church completely helpless against the onslaught of Nazism. From the start, Bonhoeffer insisted that the essence of Christianity was not its abstract precepts but the concrete reality of the shared life in Christ. In 1930, his search for that true fellowship led Bonhoeffer to America for 10 fateful months in the company of social reformers, Harlem churchmen, and public intellectuals. Energized by the lived faith he had seen, he would now begin to make what he later saw as his definitive "turn from the phraseological to the real". He went home with renewed vocation and took up ministry among Berlin's downtrodden while trying to find his place in the hoary academic establishment increasingly captive to nationalist fervor. With the rise of Hitler, however, Bonhoeffer's journey took yet another turn. The German church was Nazified, along with every other state-sponsored institution. But it was the Nuremberg laws that set Bonhoeffer's earthly life on an ineluctable path toward destruction. His denunciation of the race statutes as heresy and his insistence on the church's moral obligation to defend all victims of state violence, regardless of race or religion, alienated him from what would become the Reich church and even some fellow resisters. Soon the 27-year-old pastor was one of the most conspicuous dissidents in Germany. He would carry on subverting the regime and bearing Christian witness, whether in the pastorate he assumed in London, the Pomeranian monastery he established to train dissenting ministers, or in the worldwide ecumenical movement. Increasingly, though, Bonhoeffer would find himself a voice crying in the wilderness, until, finally, he understood that true moral responsibility obliged him to commit treason, for which he would pay with his life. Charles Marsh brings Bonhoeffer to life in his full complexity for the first time. With a keen understanding of the multifaceted writings, often misunderstood, as well as the imperfect man behind the saintly image, here is a nuanced, exhilarating, and often heartrending portrait that lays bare Bonhoeffer's flaws and inner torment, as well as the friendships and the faith that sustained and finally redeemed him. *Strange Glory* is a momentous achievement.

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Customer Reviews

This biography of Bonhoeffer gives a complete portrait of the man as fully human - contradictory, complex, seeking God's will for his life in the midst of extremely trying circumstances. It discusses his theology in the context of where he was in his life at the point that he wrote his various writings. I found this book more helpful than Metaxas' biography, in that the picture Marsh gives of Bonhoeffer was more accessible. Bonhoeffer wasn't a war hero, but a theologian and pastor who was deeply torn by the state of the church in his country. His visits to the US informed his understanding of social justice, and his life was a struggle to understand how God was working as Hitler came to power. This book is a must read for anyone interested in Bonhoeffer and the state of the German church before and in WWII.

Excellent writing, thorough documentation, and in-depth study of the life of an amazing theologian who died too young at the hands of the Nazis toward the end of World War II. The title befits a life dedicated to putting Christianity to work by fighting against persecution and genocide of the Jewish people. Bonhoeffer's courage and clarity of vision sustained him through his internment as a political prisoner of the Reich and his prior outspokenness against fascism when everyone was going along to get along. Reading about the great thinkers who influenced Dietrich Bonhoeffer opens up new perspectives. The body of his life's work--what he did and what he wrote and how he conducted himself--is well drawn out in this detailed and meticulous biography.

Clear, very readable. Organization of material is not rigidly chronological, but also thematic, which makes the narrative bounce around a bit in places. Humanizes the often canonized Bonhoeffer. The depiction of him as a child of privilege, a bit of a bon vivant, and carrying the noblesse oblige and a powerful moral sense gives some relatable insight into how his life somewhat directed him into the extraordinary situations and responses thereto. The materials suggesting latent homosexuality bear consideration, though I think Marsh may overplay this point a bit.

Strange Glory explores the manifold expression of human nature through the relatively short life of the twentieth century theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Marsh does an excellent job in retelling the story of this provocative mind, adding insightful details that others understandably glossed over. Bonhoeffer lived, at least from one perspective, an enviably charmed life. He was born into privilege, born with a gifted mind, yet also born with an unusual drive to explore spirituality. Sadly, both privilege and giftedness also served as distractions and even as obstacles to his emotional maturation. The result was that Bonhoeffer's life was one of constant war, fighting battles on several different fronts simultaneously. At any given time he was at once wrestling with his theology, his church, his culture, his politics, and well as his sense of self. The reader is reminded that man can function like a beast or as a saint, depending on his willingness to apply his power to choose. The choosing can be a tortuous process, if one is willing to become as fully informed as possible and determined to wrestle with the options until a clear path is made evident. Bonhoeffer was unwilling to run from the issues that faced him and resisted inclinations to slavishly react to circumstances. He chose to be a thinker rather than a mere lazy follower of other men's thoughts. The context within which Bonhoeffer lived added another layer to his decision making. Though he, and we, would have preferred it was otherwise, the choices we are given are not always between something good and something bad. Often, we can only choose between bad and a little less bad, or as Marsh nicely explained, between bold sin or the sin of neglect. Bonhoeffer chose not to run from the issues of his day, abandoning them for others to solve. Yet by engaging his reality he was torn between two seemingly contradictory commands given by Christ. On the one hand Jesus calls us to release those who are oppressed, yet on the other hand to love one's enemy. To disobey either was to sin, yet as Bonhoeffer concluded, sometimes sin is the only option available, which only grace allows for. So, what does a follower of Christ do when confronted with the evils perpetrated by the likes of Hitler? Are we called to love the Hitlers of life even though they

continue to destroy thousands and even millions of innocent lives, or do we so hate the evil of folks like Hitler that we are willing to participate in any mission to stop him - even if that includes his assassination? It is *not* to rescue those who are being oppressed, yet it is also sin to murder the perpetrator of oppression. In the setting of his times, Bonhoeffer discovered that his theology was only useful if it worked in real life, not simply within the four safe walls of a cathedral. Following the Jesus of scripture, Bonhoeffer had been lead into pacifism. Yet, overlaying his theological conclusion was the reality of the 1940 German regime, which inclined Bonhoeffer to set aside his pacifism - at least in this particular case. In other words, his choice to become part of an assassination plot did not mean that he had decided to cast out morality in all circumstances. With excruciating effort he concluded that *not* was morally acceptable in rare cases. Few wrestle as intensely with these issues as did Pastor Bonhoeffer. Most folks either run from stress-inducing issues or mindlessly react to them. Marsh, in this volume, invites each reader to rethink what it means to follow Jesus. There is no downside to that, since the end result is a matured faith.

First thought: "oh, another Bonhoeffer book...." but being friends of Marsh's "in-laws" I felt inclined to order.....and while I thought i'd be reading what I already knew, I was simply taken aback. I can't imagine a writer being more intense and determined to get the facts right. What new insight into the life of this "one of a kind" man. Yes, Bonhoeffer deserves all the energy Marsh exerted to "get it right." No, not just "another Bonhoeffer book" by any means.

Marsh brilliantly captures both the complexity and the ultimate heroism of this twentieth-century martyr. Avoiding simplistic hagiography, Marsh creates a fully realized portrait of this scion of the cultured German intellectual class, driven by the political realities of his day to radical Christian faithfulness. Highly recommended.

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