

Who Am I?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)

A summary and reflection on his prison poem “Who Am I?”

ABOUT THE POEM

In 1944, while imprisoned in Tegel prison in Berlin for resisting the Nazi regime, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this deeply personal poem in a letter to a close friend. He was a pastor and theologian who believed his faith called him to stand with those who were suffering, even at great cost to himself. This poem, later published in his book *Letters and Papers from Prison*, remains one of the most honest reflections on identity ever written from a prison cell.

THE POEM IN FOUR MOVEMENTS

1. What others saw. Bonhoeffer describes leaving his cell each day calmly and cheerfully, speaking freely and confidently with his guards, and bearing his hardships as someone accustomed to victory rather than defeat. To everyone watching, he appeared steady, composed, and unshaken by his circumstances.

2. What he felt inside. Yet within, he felt restless and afraid, like a bird trapped in a cage, struggling to breathe. He longed for freedom, for the company of family and friends, and for simple joys like the sight of flowers and the sound of birdsong. Some days he felt so weary that even prayer and clear thought seemed out of reach.

3. The question he could not answer. Bonhoeffer asks directly: which one is the real me, the calm man others see, or the frightened man I know myself to be? He does not resolve this tension with a tidy answer. Instead, he sits honestly with the mystery of not fully understanding himself, a struggle many of us know well.

4. The surrender that brought peace. In the end, Bonhoeffer stops trying to answer the question on his own. He places it into God’s hands, trusting that whatever the truth about himself may be, God already knows it fully. His deepest identity is not found in solving the mystery, but in belonging to the God who knows him completely.

CONNECTING TO OUR LIVES TODAY

Like Bonhoeffer, many of us carry a gap between what others see in us and what we feel within. We may appear strong while feeling tired. We may smile while carrying grief. As the years bring change to our health, our roles, and our routines, we may quietly ask, as he did, “Who am I now?” Bonhoeffer’s poem does not ask us to pretend we have it all figured out. It invites us instead to bring our whole, honest selves to God, trusting that we are still known, still held, and still loved, whoever we are and however our lives have changed.

“Whoever I am, you know me. I am yours, O God.”

*This handout faithfully summarizes Bonhoeffer’s 1944 poem; it is not the full text. The poem appears in *Letters and Papers from Prison*.*