

Article 94: The Ten Boom Family

20th Century

By Amy Cogdell

"I pity the poor Germans, Corrie. They have touched the apple of God's eye." These words, both prophetic and merciful, were spoken by Casper Ten Boom at the outbreak of World War II. Ten Boom was a watchmaker, a devout member of the Dutch Reformed Church, and the father of four children – Willem, Nollie, Betsie and Corrie. For many years, he and his wife, along with their children and three aunts, lived a humble life in the rooms above the family's watch shop in Haarlem. However, there was a spiritual depth forged in each family member during those quiet years which would shine like gold in fires of persecution.

Daily scripture reading was the foundation of Ten Boom family life. This devotion served as the springboard for many charitable and evangelistic works before the war. It also shaped their understanding of history in a unique way. They were among the few in their generation convinced of God's eternal covenant of love with the Jewish people.

After the Nazi occupation of Holland, all four children and their elderly father became involved in the Dutch underground. In the beginning, they served by smuggling Jews to safe homes in the countryside. They also helped provide these people with false identification and ration cards. Their efforts aided over 800 Jews in hiding.

By 1943, most willing homes were filled, but Jews kept coming to the Ten Boom home for help. In response, Casper, Betsie and Corrie built a secret room in the house they shared. There they sheltered up to six Jews at a time for the next year.

Heavy traffic in and out of the house aroused suspicion. On February 28, 1944, the family was betrayed and the Gestapo raided their home. The police set a trap and waited throughout the day, seizing everyone who came to the house. By evening about 30 people had been taken into custody. Willem, Nollie and a grandson, Peter, were at the house that day and were taken to prison. They were eventually released, but Corrie, Betsie and Casper were held.

Casper Ten Boom was 84 years old at the time. When police questioned him, asking if he knew that he could die for aiding the Jews, he replied, "It would be an honor to die for God's ancient people." It was an honor God granted. Casper died of natural causes after ten days in custody.

Betsie and Corrie spent the next ten months in three different prisons. They were finally moved to the Ravensbruck concentration camp where they found unthinkable conditions – suffocating stenches, overcrowding, starvation, and fleas. The godliness of Betsie's response to this suffering stunned even Corrie.

Betsie remembered Paul's instruction to give thanks in every circumstance, and she followed this word with a dogged determination. She thanked God that the guards had not discovered their Bible. She thanked God for the crowding, because so many women would hear the gospel. Finally, she thanked God for the fleas.

Betsie's faith was vindicated. Because of the fleas, the German guards would not enter the women's bunkhouse. This gave the sisters the opportunity to hold nightly prayer meetings where scores of women flocked to take comfort in the words of scripture.

Betsie died a few days before Corrie's release from Ravensbruck. Before her death, Betsie had a vision in which she saw homes of restoration for those who had survived the concentration camps. She also foresaw Corrie's ministry of reconciliation to the Germans.

Corrie lived to see Betsie's vision come true. She established homes, and travelled widely preaching a message of forgiveness and reconciliation. She also wrote a book about her family and their wartime experience entitled *The Hiding Place*. In 1967, the Yad Vashem Remembrance Authority of Israel honored Corrie as one of the Righteous Among the Nations. The following passage is an excerpt from *The Hiding Place*.

It was in a church in Munich...It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. ...

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie how thin you were!

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there. But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fraulein*,..." his hand came out, ... "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there — I whose sins had every day to be forgiven — and could not. Betsie had died in that place — could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it — I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." ...

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion — I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand, I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.⁵⁸