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CORRIE TEN BOOM: GOD'S TUMBLEWEED

Lauren Trittin

History of Christianity II

World War II was one of the darkest periods of world history, but light shines brightest in darkness. During this time, thousands of people chose to stand against the tide of evil the Nazi regime spread throughout the world, including women. It is widely known that women did their duty by entering the workforce, taking on the jobs the men left behind. Yet



this was not the only way women participated in the war effort. While men fought on the battlefield, women retaliated against the Axis powers by fighting in the underground resistance movement. Tens of thousands of women participated in the resistance in countless ways, from collecting intelligence to hiding Jews from the Gestapo.ⁱ Many were motivated by their Christian faith. Corrie ten Boom was one such person. Driven by the desire to protect the “apple of God’s eye,” ten Boom became the leader of the Dutch underground movement seeking to hide Jews from Nazi eyes. She and her sister were eventually discovered and sent to concentration camps, but remarkably never lost their faith. Instead, they brought light to hell on earth, and upon liberation, ten Boom sought to spread light into every corner of the world. Her underground work saved thousands of Jews, and her mission after the war saved thousands of souls. Corrie ten Boom’s leadership in the resistance, her mission in the death camps, and her ministry of forgiveness following her freedom illuminates the impact one person, one woman, can have if she is willing to stand against the tide.

Women were integral players in the war against Nazi Germany. Many worked in anti-Nazi journalism. The White Rose Group in Munich, co-led by Hans and Sophie Scholl, spread pamphlets across the city calling for an overthrow of the Nazi regime.ⁱⁱ Women in occupied nations participated in collecting war news of the Allies’ progress and then distributed the information to citizens.ⁱⁱⁱ Because women were less suspicious and more perceptive of danger

and risk, they were also highly involved in Allied intelligence agencies.^{iv} One third of London's trained resisters in the Special Operations division were women,^v and in France, Marie-Madeleine Fourcade was the director of the intelligence network called the Alliance.^{vi} Other women, such as Noor Inayat Khan and Edith Lotte Bonnesen, worked in radio operations, coding and decoding messages.^{vii}

Even more shocking was the amount of women involved in developing escape lines and participating in underground attacks on the Axis powers. Two of the most significant escape routes for downed Allied officers were led by women. Mary Lindell, a Red Cross Nurse, established the Comtesse Line, and the Comet Line, was directed by Andrée "Dédée" de Jong, referred to as the "Postman."^{viii} This route smuggled over one thousand airmen through German-occupied France.^{ix} Women also participated in guerrilla warfare in France, and were even leaders of the fighting, as was the case for Pearl Witherington.^x Still others resisted by hiding enemies of the Nazis, namely Allied soldiers and Jews. Leesha Rose of the Netherlands managed over 100 people in hiding,^{xi} and Edith Lotte Bonnesen hid air-dropped Allied soldiers.^{xii} And Corrie ten Boom managed the Haarlem, Holland underground ring.

Corrie was born to Casper and Cornelia ten Boom in 1892 and grew up in a family enriched by Christian faith. Her mother taught her to love all people, including those mentally and physically disabled, and her father instilled a deep love for the Jews, whom he referred to as the "apple of God's eye."^{xiii} The family held community Bible studies, and were friends with the vast majority of the town. They were constantly caring for the downtrodden, taking in children orphaned in World War I and seven missionary children. Corrie in particular reached out to young girls and mentally disabled children.^{xiv} She and her sister, Betsie, established clubs for girls in which they taught English, went on hikes, and practiced gymnastics.^{xv} Corrie then decided to lead religious services for those with mental disabilities.^{xvi} These numerous activities brought the ten Boom's many friends, friends who would later greatly contribute to the massive success of the Haarlem underground ring.

In 1940, the first bombs were dropped on Holland, and only days later, Germans occupied the country. From the start, the ten Boom family felt called to help the Jews. Casper ten Boom was so attached to them that he chose to wear the yellow star himself.^{xvii} The family's pity extended to the Germans themselves, and Casper at one point told his daughter, "I pity the

Germans, Corrie. They have touched the apple of God's eye."^{xxviii} For a time, the family fought the Germans through prayer, but soon they were called to take a more active approach.

In November of 1941, a neighbor of the ten Boom's came to their door seeking protection after the Nazis destroyed his store. The family acted immediately, connecting the man and his wife to the current underground ring who brought the couple to a safe house.^{xix} This event sparked an inner battle in Corrie. She had a deep desire to help her Jewish friends, yet she knew doing so would involve lying and stealing, actions that went against her faith. She wanted to honor God and wanted His blessing on her work in the underground before she got involved. Thus, she prayed to God, offering herself up to His service, whatever that may have been.^{xx} A few days later, more Jews began showing up at the ten Boom house (the Beje). Corrie and her family took this as God's call to participate in the underground movement to protect His people. And so they did.

Soon Corrie found herself organizing locations to send Jews into hiding, and the Beje became a key safe house in the Netherlands.^{xxi} Their family connections were able to supply them with necessary funds and ration cards to provide for their hidden guests, and Corrie became the director of 80 Dutch underground workers.^{xxii} She also became involved in the national underground resistance movement in Holland.^{xxiii} This national underground connected her to an architect whom Corrie would later discover was one of the most renowned architects in Europe.^{xxiv} This man created the famous "hiding place" in the Beje. The room, referred to as the "anglecrib," was located in Corrie's bedroom, and was never discovered by the Gestapo.^{xxv}

The ten Boom's actions were motivated by their faith, a faith reflected in every aspect of their work with Jews and fellow underground workers. Rather than simply hide away their visitors, the family sought to entertain them, providing readings and concerts for them,^{xxvi} and the Beje became known as the "happiest underground address in the Netherlands."^{xxvii} The ten Boom's did not evangelize to their Jewish guests, but had nightly Bible readings and worship, seeking to reach them through their actions driven by faith.^{xxviii} They were constantly in prayer for the Jews and their nation, and even the Germans in their midst. The family went so far as to invite German soldiers to join them at their nightly Bible studies. They sought to bring God's love to everyone, knowing that His love covers all wrong. When Corrie was asked by the underground movement to find an assassin, she replied saying she would pray, and each time went to the Lord asking for the conversion of the person they were seeking to assassinate.^{xxix}

Some were converted, but others were not. Corrie struggled with whether their guilt was also laid upon her shoulders, but came to the conclusion that love would cover all sin.^{xxx}

“God’s underground,” as named by Corrie, saved hundreds of lives during its operation until 1944. On February 28th, a man came to the Beje asking for money to help his wife who had been hiding Jews. Though Corrie was wary to help him, her concern for the possible lives at stake led her to offer her services to him.^{xxxix} Less than an hour later, the Gestapo arrived.

Corrie, her sister Betsie, and her father were taken to the Gestapo headquarters in Holland and then transferred to a penitentiary where Corrie and Betsie would spend four months. Their father died after 10 days in prison. Again, Corrie brought her faith into a bleak situation. To pass the time, she and a woman in a neighboring cell shared Bible verses they had memorized and then developed sermons based off of them.^{xxxix} When she was questioned by the prison’s lieutenant about her underground activities, she used it as an opportunity to speak to the officer about God’s love for all people, including the mentally ill.^{xxxix} During each of the following meetings, the officer asked Corrie to speak about her God, and by using this as an opportunity to preach the Gospel, Corrie discovered that the man was in his own prison, caught working for a regime who would kill his family if he stepped out of line.^{xxxix} Corrie’s heart went out to him. God had given her a new perspective and a gift of kindness in the midst of prison.

In June, 1944, the women in the prison were sent to Vught, a concentration camp in Holland. Here she and Betsie worked on radios which they compromised, and led a discussion group with the fellow prisoners on how to help those who had suffered after the war.^{xxxix} During this time, they also discovered the name of the man who had betrayed their operation. Initially, hatred for the man swept over Corrie, but she soon realized that she had murdered him in her heart, making her guilty before God as well. That night she forgave Jan Vogel and prayed for his family.^{xxxix} This was the beginning of Corrie’s journey of forgiveness.

Corrie and Betsie’s experience in concentration camps did not end in Vught. When Allied forces penetrated Holland’s borders, the women were transferred to Ravensbruck, the infamous death camp for women, while 700 men at Vught were murdered.^{xxxix} From the beginning of their time at the camp, it was clear Jesus was present with the sisters, and it was in this darkest of nights that the sisters shown the brightest. Corrie was the only woman not searched by the guards and thus managed to smuggle in a Bible, a sweater, and vitamins.^{xxxix} When they discovered the barracks were infested with fleas, Betsie told Corrie to thank God even for them. The sisters held

nightly worship services and soon discovered good reason to thank God for the fleas, for the guards refused to enter the barracks due to fear of them. Thus, the nightly services were never discovered.^{xxxix} Another sign of God's presence with the sisters was found in the miraculous never-ending amount of vitamins. The bottle they had smuggled did not run out until another woman was able to steal more from the infirmary.^{xl} Again, Corrie and Betsie brought light to a camp of death. A group of women became prayer warriors for the people of Ravensbruck, including the guards. Soon, the barracks were transformed from places of anger and depression to kindness and love.^{xli} Even the strictest guard, referred to as the Snake, began to soften in response to their prayers.^{xlii} It was she who would take Betsie to the hospital when she fell ill.

Corrie was a source of encouragement for every woman she came across and kept her gaze on a hopeful future. When she heard of 250 women being marched out of the camp, she sneaked out in the middle of the night to give each of them a message as they passed by.^{xliii} She simply told them, "Jesus is Victor." All but one of those women returned home safely at the end of the war. The sisters also made plans as to how they would help the people scarred by the war when the Allies were victorious. Betsie dreamed of opening a home for those mentally damaged by the war and even spoke of opening a camp in Germany for the broken people in the country.^{xliv} Corrie would be the one to implement these plans.

Betsie fell ill one week before Christmas of 1944. She told Corrie that by January 1, 1945, both of them would be free. Two days later, Betsie passed away. When Corrie found her body thrown on a pile of others, God gave her another miracle. Betsie's face was returned to a youthful fullness and was full of joy, and Corrie knew God was providing her a glimpse of what her sister looked like in heaven.^{xlv} Four days later, Corrie was given her certificate of discharge due to a clerical error. Because of her edema-ridden legs, Corrie was forced to stay in the hospital where she ended up caring for the other patients when the cruel nurses refused to help.^{xlvi} January 1st, 1945, Corrie was released from Ravensbruck, just as Betsie had prophesied. One week later, all women her age were sent to the gas chambers.

Corrie's freedom did not signal an end to her mission work. Just one week after arriving back home she started taking speaking engagements, and thus began her work spreading the Gospel and teaching the importance of forgiveness.^{xlvii} Her first task was to open the home for victims of the Nazi regime that Betsie had dreamed of. After establishing this home, Corrie

turned her full attention to spreading the lessons she and her sister had learned in the camps to the rest of the world.

Her journey began in America. When she arrived, she received funding, housing, and speaking engagements through connections made during her work in the resistance.^{xlviii} Corrie spoke three times a day so as “to not waste the Lord’s time,” and reached universities, churches, and prisons during her stay.^{xlix} Her emphasis was always on the healing power of forgiveness. After 10 months, she felt the call to Germany, and though she dreaded the trip, she went because God called her. Here Corrie began breathing God’s life back into the broken people of the destroyed nation. During this time, she implemented the second part of her sister’s dream and opened a camp for the suffering German people in Darmstadt, an old concentration camp.¹ In her speaking engagements, she always gave time to call the people to turn away from witchcraft and instead turn toward God. She began casting out demons in the Name of Jesus, always with the phrase, “Jesus is Victor,” in mind.^{li} Ironically, Corrie ten Boom would become more well-known in Germany than in Holland.^{lii}

In 1947, while speaking in Munich, Corrie was confronted with the greatest challenge of forgiveness she would ever face. One of the most vicious guards from Ravensbruck was in the audience, and afterward, came up to Corrie and proceeded to ask for her forgiveness. After hesitating for a moment, Corrie lifted her hand to shake his and prayed to God that He would provide the forgiveness.^{liii} He did.

Throughout the rest of her life, ten Boom would forgive multiple people who had been involved her time in the concentration camps, including her family’s betrayer and a cruel nurse.^{liv} Over the next thirty years, Corrie spoke in 64 countries sharing her story and the message that Jesus can turn loss into glory.^{lv} She sought to bring Him to every corner of the world, not caring whether she was speaking to prisoners, former Nazis, or royalty. “Spreading God’s Word has no regard for race, social position, or living conditions. Corrie saw people as individuals with a need to know Jesus Christ; their background was inconsequential.”^{lvi}

Her teaching was based on the Scripture Matthew 6:14-15 which states, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” She believed God supplied the love He demanded His children to give, just as He supplied the forgiveness she needed to extend to her previous captors.^{lvii} When a gentleman expressed his inability to forgive

himself, Corrie explained, “Jesus will blot out your sins like a cloud. A cloud does not return. He will put your sins away as far as the east is from the west. If you repent, He casts them into the depths of the sea, forgiven and forgotten. Then He puts out a sign, no fishing allowed.”^{lviii} Thus sums up Corrie’s message: repent, be forgiven, and forgive.

Corrie lived to be 91 years old and died in California in 1983. Throughout her life, she orchestrated the protection of hundreds of Jews and preached to thousands of people in every corner of the world. She followed through on her sister’s vision of homes of healing for those broken by World War II, and was named a Righteous Gentile by Israel in 1968.^{lix} She continued to pursue a life driven by love for the Lord, even after experiencing unfathomable horrors. When asked why she spoke so little of her time in the camps, she simply replied, “It is not that important. What is important is that people hear the Gospel.”^{lx} She looked only at Jesus and used the rest of the time He gave her to encourage others to do the same.

Corrie ten Boom’s ministry in the Holland resistance, concentration camps, and mission work to the rest of the world reveals the power of an individual driven by an unwavering desire to follow the light even in overwhelming darkness. She worked alongside thousands of other women who sought to fight against the evil of the Nazi regime. Most of these women are not remembered, yet they were key players in the Allied Powers’ victory. Corrie was spurred on by her faith, and because she chose to look only at Jesus, as her beloved sister entreated her, she discovered love even in the vilest of places. Even when she had the choice to lead a life of leisure after experiencing such suffering, Corrie embraced God’s call on her life to spread His truth using her powerful testimony of His faithfulness and forgiveness. Her ministry of forgiveness made her a “tumbleweed for God,”^{lxi} leaving saved souls in her wake, and her life is a testament to the power of light in the midst of darkness. As Corrie once said, “In darkness God’s truth shines most clear.”

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- ^v *Ibid.*, 96.
- ^{vi} Miller, *The Resistance*. 183.
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