

HEROES + HERETICS

Alexandra Roche examines a WW2 hero of faith

HEROES 14: CORRIE TEN BOOM: SPIRITUAL SOLDIER

There are many stories of heroic men and women who risked their lives saving Jews during WWII, so what was different about Corrie ten Boom? To be honest, when I was asked to write this article, I asked myself this same question. However, page by page, her own account of her work during and after the war had such a big impact on the way I viewed my life and my relationship with God, that I found myself on my knees in prayer for the first time in far too long.

love for the Jews

Cornelia 'Corrie' ten Boom was a Dutch Christian born in 1892. She was the daughter of a watchmaker – a trade she also learned. Corrie never married and lived in the family home in Haarlem throughout her adult life. The family lived a humble existence but kept an open-door policy for anyone in need. They also had a strong heart for the Jews and prayed for them faithfully each week.



During World War II, the ten Boom family found that they became a natural contact for Jews in Haarlem seeking refuge. Remarkably, the extensive connections made through their watchmaking business enabled the ten Booms to source safe houses and provide ration cards for more than 800 Jews. In a secret room in their own home they also hid Jews other families deemed too risky to hide.

However, betrayed in 1944 to the Gestapo, the ten Boom family were arrested and sent to prison in Holland, where Corrie's father died. Corrie and her beloved sister Betsie were later sent to Ravensbrück, a German concentration camp for women, where they endured unimaginably horrific conditions that led to Betsie's death. Even here, Corrie and Betsie longed to share the gospel with their fellow prisoners and held secret Bible studies, encouraging other Christians amongst them and leading many others to be saved. All but one of the Jews they were hiding at their house evaded the Nazis.



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later life

Corrie was eventually released from Ravensbrück due to an administrative error. She became known to the world as she spent the next thirty years (into her nineties) travelling to sixty-two countries, sharing all that she and Betsie had learned about God's love and forgiveness in prison. She also wrote about these experiences in several books, including *The Hiding Place* which was later made into a film. She was knighted by the Queen of Holland as a war hero, and given the title 'Righteous Among the Nations' by the state of Israel. Today her house in Haarlem serves as a museum.



personal faith

Having saved hundreds of lives and leading many thousands of souls to Christ, Corrie ten Boom sounds every part the Christian hero. However, what is striking throughout her books is Corrie's brutal honesty about her humanity. Even though she loved Christ, time and time again she describes situations where she failed to trust him, where she was sinful and when her faith was weak.

For example, when Corrie first entered the concentration camp, she could not bear the cruel conditions. She found it hard to obey the

command in 1 Thessalonians to give thanks in *all* circumstances.¹ She wrote about how selfish she was with a bottle of medicine that she had smuggled in for Betsie and didn't want to share with other prisoners. She was afraid the medicine bottle would run out if she shared it, but God made it last until more medicine was available.

impossible with men but possible with God

Perhaps most remarkable was her story of forgiveness after release from the camp. One day she met a former guard from Ravensbrück who had been one of the cruelest. He had heard her usual message

at a meeting, and asked Corrie for her forgiveness. Corrie had 'angry, vengeful thoughts'. In her own words: 'I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity'. Yet Corrie's story is testimony to the fact that 'what is impossible with men is possible with God'. She could not be thankful for the conditions in Ravensbrück, but God showed her how he could use even the fleas to work out his plans! She wasn't able to forgive the Nazi guard, but as Corrie prayed: 'Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me *your* forgiveness', 'the most incredible thing happened...into my heart

sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me... 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.'

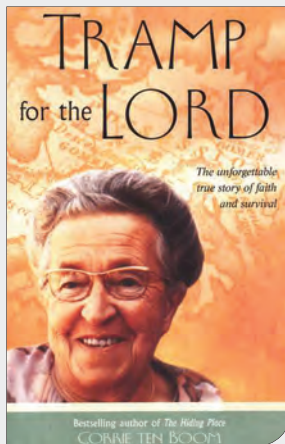
how is God shaping your character?

So what was it about Corrie ten Boom's story that moved me to prayer? Corrie made me realise that if God used a humble watchmaker, likewise God could use a fourth year medical student – perhaps in a great way, perhaps in a way that I will never come to realise. But would I be ready? Could I have endured what Corrie went through? If she was called to forgive the man responsible for her sister's death, who might I be asked to forgive, and could I do it?

Thankfully God prepares his people. Corrie spent her first fifty years building her relationship with God and soaking herself in Scripture – and even after that she still often had to be reminded to trust him! Like Esther, only on reflection could she see how God used sometimes seemingly insignificant events in her life 'for such a time as this'. However, even if we don't feel prepared, we need not be afraid. As Corrie's father once told her:

'Corrie,' he began gently, 'when you and I go to Amsterdam – when do I give you your ticket?'

'Why, just before we get on the train.'



'Exactly. And our wise Father in Heaven knows when we're going to need things, too. Don't run ahead of him, Corrie. When the time comes... you will look into your heart and find the strength you need – just in time.'

What we need to realise is what Betsie reminded Corrie: That 'there are no "ifs" in God's world. And no places that are safer than other places. The centre of his will is our only safety'. God's will is the only place that we might also find contentment. Therefore, as Corrie prayed, we would be wise to pray also about every aspect of our lives: 'Lord Jesus, keep me in your will! Don't let me go mad by poking about outside it.'

You can read Corrie's story of the war in her own beautiful words in *The Hiding Place*. She also describes her life before the war in the book *In my Father's*

House and her mission to share the gospel after the war in *Tramp for the Lord*. ■