



# Radical Forgiveness

■ by Linda Ostlund, MS, LGPC



On September 1, 1939, World War II began—Germany invaded Poland. World War II would not end until September 2, 1945.

## The Story

In May 1940, the Germans invaded the Netherlands. Two years later, in May 1942, a well-dressed woman with a suitcase in hand came to the Ten Boom's family home. She told the family she was a Jew; her husband had been arrested several months earlier, and her son had gone into hiding. She was fearful to stay any longer in her home. She heard that the Ten Booms had previously helped her Jewish neighbors—would they help her too? The patriarch of the family was a devoted reader of the Old Testament. He believed the Jews were the “chosen people” and told the woman, “In this household, God's people are always welcome.”

The Ten Booms were proactive helping and harboring Jews in their home until February 1944. They created “the hiding place”, a secret room in Corrie's bedroom behind a false wall that would hold six people. Corrie soon became part of the Dutch underground resistance network and oversaw a network of smuggling Jews to safe places. It is estimated that around 800 Jews were saved by the Ten Boom's efforts.

## The Betrayal

On February 28, 1944, this family was betrayed by a Dutch informant. The Gestapo (AKA, Nazi secret police) raided the home. Throughout the day, they seized everyone who came to the house. By evening, about 30 people had been taken into custody, including the family: Casper (the patriarch); Corrie; Corrie's siblings—Betsie, Willem, Nollie; and a nephew Peter were all taken to prison. Left behind in the home and who the Gestapo never found were six Jews in “the hiding place”. Within 47 hours, after the raid and the arrests, the six Jews were liberated by the Dutch resistance movement and placed in safe houses. A letter was written to Corrie while she and Betsie were in prison, saying in a code message, “All the watches are safe,” implying all the Jews escaped and were in safety.

## The Prison

Casper was 84 years old when he died, after only 10 days in the Scheveningen Prison. Corrie and Betsie spent 10 months in three different prisons. The last was the notorious women's Ravensbrück Concentration Camp located near Berlin, Germany. Life in the camp was horrendous and unbearable. Imprisonment in a concentration camp meant certain death. Corrie and Betsie, however, found emotional and spiritual strength by spending their time sharing Jesus' love with their fellow prisoners, daily reading Scripture passages from a small New Testament that they were able to smuggle into the camp. Many women became Christians in that terrible place because of Corrie's and Betsie's witness to them.

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On December 16, 1944, Betsie, at age 59, died at Ravensbrück of starvation and lack of medical care. Corrie remembered Betsie's last words before she died:

"We must tell them what we have learned here.  
We must tell them that there is no pit so deep  
that God's love is not deeper still. They will  
listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here."

## The Release

Two weeks after Betsie's death, Corrie, at age 53, was released from the camp due to claims of "clerical error". Corrie often called this occurrence a miracle. Shortly after Corrie's release, all the other women in her age group at Ravensbrück were executed. Corrie realized her life was a gift from God, and she needed to share what she and Betsie had learned in Ravensbrück: "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still."

## The Encounter

In 1947, Corrie was invited to speak at a church in Munich, Germany. Her message: God forgives. As she spoke, she shared from her favorite mental picture—that of the sea. She said, "I like to think that's where forgiven sins were thrown. When we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever."

Corrie finished her message, and as she was leaving the church, she said, "And that's when I saw him." This man was coming toward her. She began to have flashbacks. "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!" This man had been a guard at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp where they were sent.

Corrie was conscious of this man in front of her with his hand thrust out. He said, "A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" The man continued, "You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk. I was a guard there. But since that time, 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. Fräulein, will you forgive me?" His hand again went out towards Corrie.

Corrie was experiencing flashbacks again. "I stood there. I could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place—could this man erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?" This man's hand was still held out. Corrie was mentally struggling. "I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do."

## The Freedom

She finally reasoned, "I had to do it. I knew that. The message that God forgives and gives His grace has a prior condition: that we forgive and show grace to those who have injured us." She began to quote the words of Jesus to herself. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father in heaven forgive you your trespasses" (Matthew 6:15).

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Corrie stood there with the coldness clutching her heart, not yielding to shake that man's hand. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of feelings. She then cried out in her soul, "God! Help me!" Corrie then, though mechanically, thrust her hand into this man's outstretched hand to her. In her testimony, she shared, "As I did, an incredible thing took place: a healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes." She verbally cried out: "I forgive you brother—with all my heart!"

For a long moment, Corrie and this man grasped each other's hands—the former guard and the former prisoner. Corrie concluded her testimony and said, "I had never known God's love and grace so intensely as I did then."

## The Impossible

You might say, "That's impossible! I would never forgive!" You are right, it is impossible—it's extreme; it's radical. Forgiveness is an unnatural response; it's blatantly unfair. Sadly, it's our natural human condition.

## The Holy God

Why then would God make this unnatural act so central to the Christian faith? Theologically, the Gospels give a straightforward answer to why God asks us to forgive: because that is what God is like. When Jesus first gave the command "Love your enemies", he added this rationale: "...that you may be sons and daughters of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Luke 6:27-28; Matthew 5:45). So, what do we call it then? It's grace.

The Christian life does not primarily center on ethics or rules, but rather it involves a new way of seeing—a "radical" way. You begin to see yourself as a sinner who cannot please God by any method of self-improvement or self-enlargement. Instead, you learn that a holy God already loves you, despite your defects, and forgives you (Psalm 103:10-14). At that point, your neighbor is a fellow human being and is also a sinner and is loved by God. You are now in a position to forgive—it's extreme, it's radical, it's God's way—it's grace! ■



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