

BETSIIE TEN BOOM

GRATITUDE



Born on August 19, 1885, Elisabeth ten Boom, or “Betsie,” was the oldest child in her family. Her brother, Willem, and sisters, Nollie and Corrie, used to run and play outside, while Betsie was forced to sit inside doing needlework because of a condition called pernicious anemia. This meant her body didn’t absorb vitamin B-12 properly, so she grew weak and tired easily. While others might have complained, Betsie had a natural gift for gratitude (being thankful) and a desire to make the world around her a beautiful place.

As she got older, she joined her father, Casper, in his shop. She kept his books, recording how much people owed for the watches and clocks her father repaired and calculating expenses. But what she really loved was keeping house, not books. She spent her evenings mending the skirts Corrie ripped while running about and riding her bike around town. Using her skill at sewing, she made all the women in her family silk dresses.

*“We must tell them that there is no pit so deep
that He is not deeper still.”*

Eventually, Willem and Nollie both married and moved out of the house, and Cornelia ten Boom, Betsie's mother, passed away. This left just Casper, Betsie, and Corrie. They discovered that Corrie was a natural in the shop, while Betsie was gifted at cooking and keeping up with the housework. She served meals not just to her family, but to police officers, neighbors, and friends. Even when food was scarce, Betsie had a knack for making a feast out of a few potatoes. She would place a pot of tulips in the window each spring, hoping for enough sunlight to keep them alive and fill the kitchen with their beauty.

When Germany threatened the ten Boom's country, Holland, the prime minister assured the Dutch people (the name for those from Holland) that there would be no war. But Casper told his daughters this was not true—there would be war, and Holland would fall to the Germans. Betsie and Corrie responded by kneeling next to the piano bench, praying for the people of Holland. To Corrie's surprise, Betsie also prayed for the Germans.

Casper was right—war did come to Holland. As the Germans attacked, the sound of bombs exploding could be heard through their town. One night, Corrie woke to hear Betsie in the kitchen, making a cup of tea. She got up to join her sister. Later, as she went back to her bedroom, she found a piece of shrapnel from a bomb on her pillow, just where her head had been. She suggested to Betsie what might have happened if she hadn't heard her moving in the kitchen. Betsie responded, "There are no 'ifs' in God's world. And no places that are safer than other places. The center of His will is our only safety—oh Corrie, let us pray that we may always know it!"

Gradually, just as in Germany and other occupied countries, the treatment of Jews worsened. As more and more were arrested and sent to concentration camps, Corrie and Betsie knew they must do something. They built a hiding place in Corrie's room behind a wall, and they provided a place to stay for many of their Jewish countrymen and women. Needing to be able to hide

their guests at a moment's notice, they had an alarm system installed. Betsie practiced tactics to delay officers at the door so the Jewish guests could hide quickly. They had trial runs, where the alarm would sound during dinnertime and everyone would run and hide to make it appear like only three people were in the home, rather than nine or ten.

In the evenings, Betsie scheduled entertainment for the family and their guests. One guest might play the violin or another play the piano. They would read a play together, with each person reading the lines of a certain character. One guest knew Italian, and he would teach the language to the other people in the home.

When Betsie was fifty-eight, the family's work of hiding Jews was discovered. Soldiers came to the door, and the guests quickly hid in the hiding place. The officers searched through the house, striking Betsie and Corrie on their faces in an attempt to discover where the guests were hidden.

Neither woman revealed the secret, and the family was arrested.

As Corrie saw her fragile sister's swollen lip and bruised cheek, she exclaimed, "Oh Betsie! He hurt you!"

"Yes," Betsie replied. "I feel sorry for him."

They were forced to board a bus and taken to the office of the chief interrogator, whose job it was to discover what exactly the family had done and where the Jews were hidden. He looked at Casper, who was eighty-four years old now, and wondered why he had to be arrested.

"I'd like to send you home, old fellow," he said to Betsie's father. "I'll take your word that you won't cause any more trouble."

"If I go home today," Casper responded, "tomorrow I will open my door again to any man in need who knocks."

Betsie watched as the interrogator looked at her father with anger and sent him back to sit down.

They were transported to a prison, where the men were separated from the women. Betsie and Corrie said goodbye to their father, unaware it was the last time they would see him. They were also separated from one another for four months, the longest they'd ever been apart. While separated, Corrie received word that all the people in the hiding place had been saved. She also learned that their father had died ten days after being arrested. As they left that prison for another one, Betsie and Corrie found each other at a train station and stayed together from then on.

Betsie had been given a Bible, which was forbidden in the camp, and had generously torn the pages out and handed it out, book by book, to the women in her cell. She saw her surroundings as a mission field, full of people who needed to know the love of God.

“What better way could there be to spend our lives?” she asked Corrie.

“Whatever are you talking about?” Corrie responded.

“These young women. . . . Corrie, if people can be taught to hate, they can be taught to love! We must find the way, you and I, no matter how long it takes.”

Corrie realized Betsie was talking about the guards, not just the fellow prisoners. She saw the guards, who treated them terribly, as “wounded human beings,” desperately in need of love.

Corrie, too, had been given a Bible. Betsie kept it hidden in a cloth bag, tied around her neck and tucked under her clothes. At night, after the day's work, the two sisters held secret prayer meetings around their bunk. More and more women wanted to hear the truth of Scripture and to pray with the sisters.

One day, Corrie learned the identity of the man who had betrayed them from a fellow prisoner. Jan (pronounced “Yon”) Vogel was the man's name, and he had made a business of betraying his fellow Dutchmen and women. Corrie was angry, unable to think of much other than this terrible man.

“Betsie, don’t you feel anything about Jan Vogel?” she asked her sister. “Doesn’t it bother you?”

“Oh yes, Corrie!” Betsie replied. “Terribly! I’ve felt for him ever since I knew—and pray for him whenever his name comes into my mind. How dreadfully he must be suffering.”

Convicted by her sister’s words, Corrie silently prayed and forgave Jan Vogel.

Soon the sisters found themselves boarding another train, this time arriving at Ravensbrück, a German concentration camp just for women. When they arrived, they had to cut their hair off, and Corrie was sad to see Betsie’s chestnut waves fall to the ground. They slept five to a bed, and it wasn’t long before they began gathering these new women for prayer meetings and Bible studies.

One night, the women’s faces lit up as Betsie read to them from the words of Paul in Romans 8:35–39:

Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or

persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

These words were especially meaningful to women who faced nakedness each time they had to report for medical inspection. One day as they were in line, waiting to remove their clothes for the humiliating inspection, it occurred to Corrie that Jesus, too, had experienced the humiliation of nakedness when He died on the cross.

“Betsie,” she said to her sister, who was in line in front of her, “they took *His* clothes, too.”

She heard a small gasp, and Betsie answered, “Oh, Corrie. And I never thanked Him.”

Betsie, always weak because of her anemia, had developed a cough that worsened over time. Corrie had smuggled vitamin drops into the camp with her, but she knew the small bottle couldn't last, especially because Betsie insisted on sharing the drops with other women, at times up to twenty-five each day. And yet, each time she needed them, the drops continued to come out. Betsie told Corrie not to try to explain why it was happening, just to accept it as a gift from God.

One problem they couldn't cure was the infestation of fleas in their new barracks, or bunkroom. The fleas covered their bedding and their bodies, biting them at night. When they first discovered them, Corrie was distraught. What could they do about fleas?

Betsie remembered what they had read that morning in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18:

Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in everything; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

“That's it, Corrie!” Betsie exclaimed. “That's His answer. ‘Give thanks in all circumstances!’ That's what we can do. We can start right now to thank God for every single thing about this new barracks!”

“Such as?” asked Corrie, doubtfully.

Betsie responded with a list of things: the sisters were together, they had a Bible, the room was crowded so more women could hear the good news about Jesus, even the fleas.

“Betsie,” said Corrie, “there's no way even God can make me grateful for a flea.”

“Give thanks in *all* circumstances,” answered Betsie.

The sisters would read the Bible each night, translating it aloud from Dutch to German, then listening as it was passed throughout the barracks in French, Polish, Russian, and Czech. The women were thirsty for the truth and grace of God's Word. And to Betsie and Corrie's shock, the guards never came in and disturbed them. Guards were in every other room but never theirs for some reason.

One day, when Betsie and other women in their barracks were doing their assigned knitting, they had a question about the work and asked a guard to come answer it. But no guard would enter the room; they all refused.

That night, when Corrie returned from her work, Betsie told her she had discovered why the guards never entered and disturbed their Bible study. She explained how no guards would come help them and how one guard finally explained why.

“Because of the fleas!” she proclaimed excitedly. “That’s what she said, ‘That place is crawling with fleas!’”

Betsie had a soft heart toward her fellow prisoners, but also toward the guards who persecuted them. She wanted them to know that love was greater than hate. She told Corrie that when they were released, they would have a large house with beautiful gardens, and they would use it to help people who had been in the concentration camps. She described the house in such detail, down to the statues in the hall, that

it was as if she had been there. But she also had a vision of a camp that was turned into a place to help former guards and those who had treated the prisoners cruelly. She told Corrie they “must tell people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here.”

Eventually, Betsie grew so weak and sick that she could no longer move her arms and legs. She died on December 16, 1944, at the age of fifty-nine. It was just fifteen days before Corrie was released from the camp and allowed to return to their home.

Corrie went on to do just what Betsie had said—she told people about their time in the camp and described Betsie’s vision of a home where people from the camps could learn to live again. One day, after she had spoken to a group, a woman came up to her and offered the use of her fifty-six-room mansion with extensive gardens. As she described it, down to the floors and statues, Corrie realized it was the house Betsie had envisioned.

Corrie went on to tell this story of God’s love to people all over the world, and even though Betsie didn’t get to see it, her life inspired many people to set aside their hate and learn instead to love.

SOURCE

Corrie ten Boom and Elizabeth and John Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2006).

EMPOWERED WITH GRATITUDE

Because everything we know about Betsie is from Corrie’s memory and perspective, she can seem like she’s not fully human—as if she had no flaws. But when we read about her, we know she’s the kind of person who, if she could tell her own story, would be quick to point out her own sin and lack of thankfulness. Betsie wasn’t perfect, but she was captured by the love of Jesus and wanted everyone else to know that love too.

Betsie had the God-given ability to see the humanity in each person and to empathize with

them. (*Empathy* means to understand and feel what another person feels.) She felt badly for the soldier who hit her face, for the man who betrayed her family, and for the guards who persecuted the prisoners. This is not a natural human ability—it’s something God has to do in our hearts. The same God who helped Betsy feel empathy can help you with that too. It probably won’t be toward a prison guard, but it could be toward a family member or classmate. We understand what others feel when we think about how *we* would feel if we didn’t know the love of Jesus.

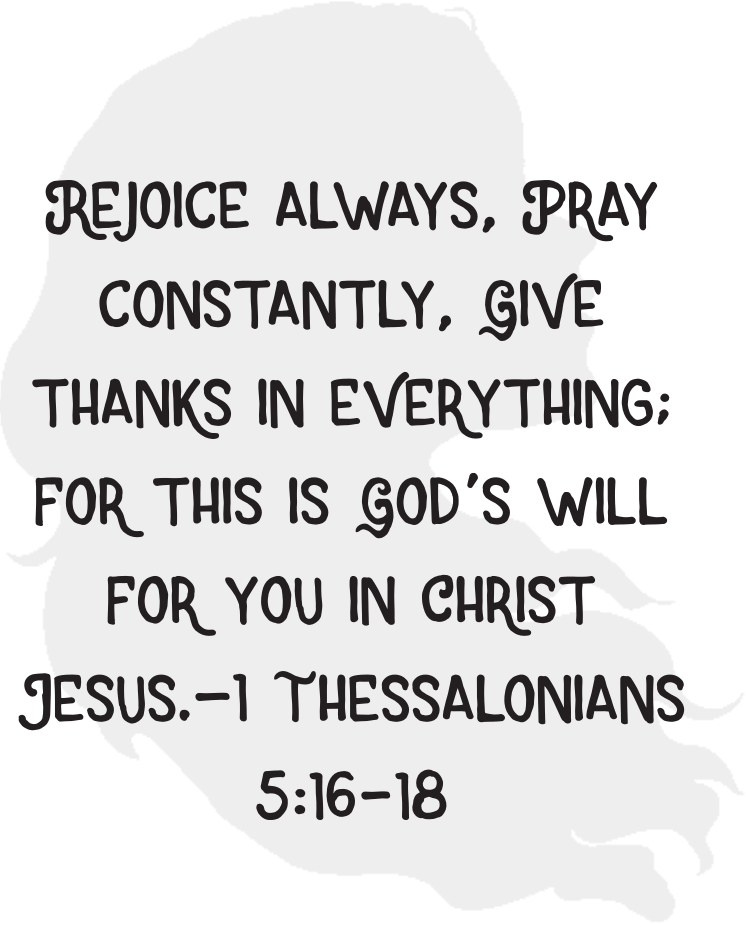
In many ways, empathy comes from gratitude, which we see repeatedly in Betsie’s story. She was so grateful for God’s love for her in Jesus that she saw everyone around her with His eyes—as people who needed Him. When we’re thankful for God’s love for us, we can look around us at friends, neighbors, and family with the same love for them.

God alone can give us the kind of radical gratitude that thanks Him even for fleas. And yet, Betsie knew that God is in control, and she trusted that she could be grateful for whatever He brought

her way. Through His power, you can “give thanks in all circumstances.”

QUESTIONS

1. Are there any things in your life that you have a hard time thanking God for? What are they?
2. If you are in Christ, which means you’ve trusted Him for salvation and forgiveness of sins, then God is working all things for your good. How does knowing this lead you to be grateful for whatever happens in life?
3. Does being in Christ mean everything that happens will be easy and fun? How does Betsie’s life answer that question?
4. Read Matthew 28:20. What was the last thing Jesus said to His disciples and followers before He went back into heaven? That promise is for you too.
5. Pray that you would know that promise deep down in your heart and that it would help you be grateful in all circumstances today.



**REJOICE ALWAYS, PRAY
CONSTANTLY, GIVE
THANKS IN EVERYTHING;
FOR THIS IS GOD’S WILL
FOR YOU IN CHRIST
JESUS.—1 THESSALONIANS
5:16–18**