

It's that time again, time for my annual Christian biography. Each year, on or around Reformation Sunday, which 500 years ago began the spread of the Scriptures and the rebirth of the gospel message, I share a biography of a man or woman who has made a significant impact on this gospel message.

If you are newer to our church, this is not my typical pattern. This is the only message out of the whole year that I depart from preaching through a book of the Bible.

Technically, last Sunday was Reformation Sunday and today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. I didn't plan it this way, but by God's providence, the person I chose for the biography overlaps well with the emphasis on the persecuted church.

This is the 11th year in a row I have done this. Here are the past people I have covered. Three of the eleven have been women and this morning is the most contemporary of them all, given that Elisabeth Elliot just passed away this summer.

William Tyndale, b. 1536
Ulrich Zwingli, b. 1484
David Brainerd, b. 1718
George Whitefield, b. 1714
Amy Carmichael, b. 1867
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, b. 1906
Benjamin Rush, b. 1746
Fanny Crosby, b. 1820
Richard Baxter, b. 1615
J. Gresham Machen, b. 1881
Elisabeth Elliot, b. 1926

Elisabeth Elliot's book *Passion and Purity*, was my generation's version of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, but even better. Because Jim and Elisabeth were deeply in love with one another and because they did not get married until many years later due to their service on the mission field, theirs is one of the great love stories of our day. Here is part of their story in Elisabeth's own words.

"We walked half a block in silence. Then, suddenly, 'We've got to get squared away on how we feel about each other,' Jim said. I was dumbfounded. No preliminaries, nothing. Just like that. Bang. The revelation I'd been hoping for—he had some feelings. And he was assuming that I had some. I was a little piqued at this assumption. It seemed presumption, since I thought I had done quite well at concealing my interest. The last thing I wanted was to hint in any way that I had thought twice about him—until, that is, he hinted that he was interested in me. Now what was I to say?

"Feel about each other? You mean—"

"Come on, Bett. Don't tell me you didn't know I was in love with you?"

"I had no idea."

"Really? But you must have! If you didn't—then all I can say is that you must have thought I was a pretty nice guy. I've been knocking myself out to be near you, be nice to you, show you how I felt without actually saying anything. You mean you didn't notice?"

"I noticed. I was afraid to believe my eyes. I told myself you couldn't possibly be interested, let alone—"

"In love. That's what I'm telling you."¹



Despite being madly in love with one another early in their relationship, Elisabeth recounted Jim's first impression of her. "I smiled later when I learned Jim had written his parents about 'a tall, lean girl, far from beautiful, but with a queer personality-drive that interests me.'"² It's probably good she didn't know about that for a while! Both were Greek majors at Wheaton College. She was born on the mission field and Jim's dad was a Plymouth Brethren pastor. Both were committed, passionate believers who were

headed to the mission field—but not together.

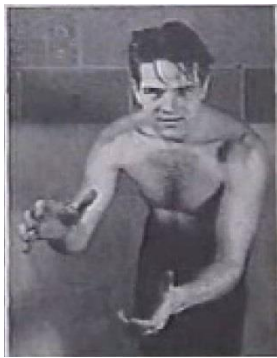
Their love was nurtured over a long distance. Jim wrote, "I dare not stay home while Quichuas perish. What if the well-filled church in the homeland needs stirring? They have the Scriptures Moses, and the prophets."³ "My going to Ecuador is God's counsel, as is my leaving Betty, and my refusal to be counseled by all who insist I should stay and stir up the believers in the U.S. And how do I know it is His counsel? 'Yea, my heart instructeth me in the night seasons.' Oh, how good!

Unlike many young couples today, their relationship had a definite Godward focus.

“I’m praying definitely for two things: first, that the Lord will give us wisdom in our relationship— even in the business of letter writing. Second, that as long as we’ve got anything to do with each other, that each of us will be an influence upon the other for closer fellowship with the Lord. I don’t mean that we’ll be preaching to each other—but just that our attraction for each other will be a means of attracting us more to the Lord. I know that’s the way you feel too.”⁴

In 1960, four years after Jim’s martyrdom, *Christianity Today* shared these details with their readers. “[Elisabeth] traces her conversion to early childhood. She made her first public confession of faith at the age of 10. Through her late teens she had planned to be a surgeon. Not until she enrolled in Wheaton College did the call come for foreign missionary service. She was known as a no-nonsense type with marked abilities as a debater and writer for student publications. He was one of the most popular men on campus.”⁵

This is a biography about Elisabeth Elliot but I can’t some extra focus on Jim. Knowing a little about Jim also tells you something about the character of Elisabeth. Many of you know about Jim’s discipline and passion for overseas missions, but since sports is so ingrained in our culture, I thought this would be helpful. This is recounted by his college roommate at Wheaton.



Jim was blessed with a strong body and fine build. Feeling called of God to pioneer missionary work, he decided that he must develop his body to its fullest potential to be prepared for the rigors of life in the jungle. He chose wrestling as the best sport to do this. He had not wrestled in high school, so he had no background in the sport. However, because he threw himself into it with all the vigor possible, he made the college varsity wrestling team his freshman year.

I shall never forget his first college match. In those days there was only one college/university division. So Wheaton College had to compete often with schools of the Big Ten or similar size. In my college days we wrestled against Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan State, Northwestern, Notre Dame, and others.

In our first match of the freshman year we met the University of Illinois. Jim had the misfortune of meeting the national champion in his weight class. Since Jim had never wrestled before, he was somewhat baffled. The champion put every wrestling hold he could think of on Jim but could not turn him onto his back and pin him. We discovered that Jim was double jointed! No matter what hold the champion tried, it didn’t work on Jim, as his limbs would simply bend beyond all belief but would not turn him. From that day on we called him The Rubber Man.⁶

Jim was obviously a gifted athlete, but despite his success on the wrestling mat, Jim’s had a unique take on sports. If you enjoy playing sports, see if this comes anywhere close to your perspective.

“I wrestle solely for the strength and co-ordination of muscle tone that the body receives while working out, with the ultimate end that of presenting a more useful body as a living sacrifice. This God knows, and even though He chose to allow it to be strained, the motive

was for His glory and the faith He honors. Simplicity of heart and freedom from anxiety He expects of us, and gives grace to have both.”⁷

He enjoyed the discipline and competition involved in sports. He was not afraid to celebrate victories. You can see the effort he put into wrestling is the same effort he later put into missions. But in a letter to his parents, you can see his true perspective on sports. If you enjoy watching sports, see if this comes anywhere close to your perspective.

We won second place at the Cleveland tournament, but what is that? Nothing abides. Behold, the Son of God comes! One flash of his burning eye will melt all our polished marble and burnished gold to nothing. One word from his righteous lips will speak destruction to the vast rebellion we call the human race. One peal of his vengeful laughter will rock the libraries of our wise and bring them crashing to a rubble heap. The wise shall be taken in their own craftiness; mountains shall be brought low. What shall abide that day? “Lo, He that doeth the will of God abideth forever.”⁸



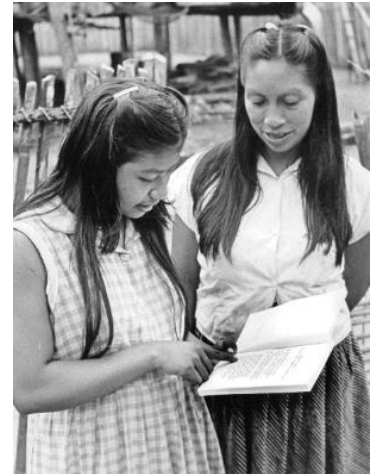
Jim and Elisabeth Elliot are best known for the tragic spearing of Jim and four other men. They had made contact with the Auca Indians who were so brutal their murder rate among warring tribes was estimated at 75%. The very word “auca” was actually the language of a neighboring tribe, the Quichua’s and it meant “savage.”⁹ “The Aucas killed for sport, lust, jealousy or out of simple irritation. One Indian speared both his friend’s wife and mother to death as a joke.”¹⁰ Everyone knew this would be dangerous work so they proceeded very carefully. As you may know, they lowered gifts on a rope from the airplane as it circled above. They were excited when

the Indians took their gifts and started returning placing their own gifts in the bucket for the missionaries.

They knew a little of the language from a woman, Dayuma, who had left the tribe and had converted to Christ. Dayuma died just last year. She was thought to be in her early 80's but no one knows exactly when she was born.

They eventually met some of the Indians in person. They even took one of the Aucas up in the plane for a ride. By all accounts, they were become friends with the Aucas. But they were always on guard, always aware that the next meeting could be deadly.

Elisabeth wrote, "I often thought I was going to lose my husband," At their last parting, she says, she wondered if she would ever see him again. They had talked just before he left as to what she would do if he should not return.¹¹



On January 8, 1956, the five men planned to meet the Aucas by the River near their settlement. Several men emerged from the jungle and speared all five to death. The missionaries had guns with them but no one fired a single shot at the Indians. Amazingly, the plane was not recovered for almost forty years and what's left of it now sits in the museum of Mission Aviation Fellowship. Their story of sacrifice, which was highlighted by *Life* magazine, inspired a whole generation to the mission field.



The part we hear less about is for the perspective of the widows. Elliot describes this in great detail in her book, *Through the Gates of Splendor*.

At about nine thirty Johnny's report came through. Marj relayed it to me in Shandia: "Johnny has found the plane on the beach. All the fabric is stripped off. There is no sign of the fellows." Dee Short, a missionary from western Ecuador, who happened to be in Quito when news of the disaster arrived, had come to Arajuno. As the party left, Marilou turned to him and said with finality: "There is no hope. All the men are dead."¹²

Side note-Ed McCully's wife, Marilou, returned to the states and married Walter Leifeld who taught at Trinity Seminary. I had him for one class when I was at Trinity but never knew he was married to this famous widow. Elisabeth continues...

Probably most of the ground party would have agreed with her, [that all the men were dead] but, nonetheless, every time they rounded a bend of the river they looked expectantly for one or more of the missing men. Back in Shell Mera the radio crackled again. Marj answered: "Shell Mera standing by." Johnny Keenan reported. "Another body sighted, about 200 feet below Palm Beach." And once again, God, who had promised grace to help in time of need, was true to His word. None of us wives knew which two these bodies might prove to be but we did know "in Whom we had believed." His grace was sufficient.

The five women waited for more news. "I realized that the deepest spiritual lessons are not learned by His letting us have our way in the end, but by His making us wait, bearing with us in love and patience until we are able to honestly to pray what He taught His disciples to pray: Thy will be done."¹³ Elisabeth waited for five years to marry Jim and now she had to wait for news if he were dead or alive.

One body was caught under the branches of a fallen tree; only a large foot with a gray sock appeared at the surface of the muddy water. In reading his notes of another, Nurnberg said: "This one had on a red belt of some woven material." Four of us turned our eyes toward the fifth, Olive Fleming. "That was Pete," Olive said simply.

Identification of the four bodies was finally positive from wedding rings and watches, change purse, notebooks. Ed was not one of the four, so it was finally definite: all five were dead. In the providence of God the missing body was the one identified by the Quichuas the day before. Not only had they brought back his watch, but also they had taken off one of his shoes (a tremendous shoe— size thirteen and one-half) and thrown it up on the beach.

On Saturday morning Captain DeWitt of the Rescue Service asked us five widows if we would "care to fly over Palm Beach to see your husbands' grave?" We replied that if this were not asking too much, we would be grateful. The Navy R-4D took us out over the jungle, where the Curaray [River] lay like a brown snake in the undulating green. Pressing our faces close to the windows as we knelt on the floor of the plane, we could see the slice of white sand where the Piper stood. Olive Fleming recalled the verses that God had impressed on her mind that morning: 'For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.' He who has prepared us for this very thing is God . . . 'Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord.' " As the plane veered away, Marj Saint said: "That is the most beautiful little cemetery in the world."¹⁴



If that weren't hard enough, but two years later Elisabeth went back to the same tribe who slaughtered her husband to take the good news to them. In 1960, Christianity Today recorded her struggle.

But Mrs. Elliot concedes that her "biggest test of faith" was in taking little Valerie along. The hazards of the jungle were only too evident and she had to face the possibility that the



Aucas might choose to carry off the youngster. She says she appreciated the kind warnings of fellow Christians, but felt that "as long as this is what the Lord requires of me, than all else is irrelevant."¹⁵

Forty years later, she wrote about God's will.

Does it make sense to pray for guidance about the future if we are not obeying in the thing that lies before us today? How many momentous events in Scripture depended on one person's seemingly small act of obedience!" Rest assured: Do what God tells you to do now, and, depend on it, you *will* be shown what to do next.¹⁶

Through the Gates of Splendor ends with this epilogue.

NOVEMBER 1958 Nearly three years have passed since that Sunday afternoon. Today I sit in a tiny leaf-thatched hut on the Tiwanu River, not many miles southwest of "Palm Beach." In another leaf house, just about ten feet away, sit two of the seven men who killed my husband. Gikita, one of the men, has just helped Valerie, who is now three and one-half, roast a plantain. Two of his sons have gone to the forest, shouldering their skillfully-



made blowguns in search of meat to feed the fifteen or twenty Auca Indians who are at present in this clearing. How did this come to be? Only God who made iron swim, who caused the sun to stand still, in whose hand is the breath of every living thing— only this God, who is our God forever and ever, could have done it.

Here is a [brief audio clip of the same event](#) from her book, sitting next to her husband's killers.

How many young mothers would have such faith? Jim Elliot and the other four men tend to get all of the credit but in my opinion, no one was braver than this woman in her late twenties. She wrote 28 books. Her most well known is *Through the Gates of Splendor* which was number 9 on Christianity Today's Top 50 Books that Have Shaped Evangelicals¹⁷ Here is a piece of wisdom from one book on the subject of doubt. "There are those who insist that it is a very bad thing to question God. To them, "why?" is a rude question. That depends, I believe, on whether it is an honest search, in faith, for His meaning, or whether it is the challenge of unbelief and rebellion."¹⁸

There was fruit from the blood of these five martyrs but not right away. In 1960, Christianity Today reported this news. "Mrs. Elliot has been asked countless times whether the Auca project has as yet seen any conversions. Her reply is that several of the Aucas do repeat prayers, but that it is impossible to determine what comes from the heart." You would think that would have been discouraging for her and others.



However, “According to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's World Christian Database, some 80 percent of the Waodani [formerly called the Aucas] have heard the message, with 40 percent professing Christian faith. (MAF, however, estimates that only a quarter of the group is Christian.)”¹⁹



Elisabeth and Jim’s love story resulted in a five year friendship, a two year marriage and one daughter. In 1969 she married her second husband, a seminary professor Addison Leitch. He died 4 years later from cancer. She married her third husband, Lars Gren in 1977 and they were married for 38 years until Elisabeth passed away in June. Because of the faith she had through all of these trials, Elisabeth Elliot is uniquely qualified to speak to us about deep suffering. Let’s allow her to speak to us.

“Our vision is so limited we can hardly imagine a love that does not show itself in protection from suffering. The love of God is of a different nature altogether. It does not hate tragedy. It never denies reality. It stands in the very teeth of suffering.”²⁰

“While it is perfectly true that some of my worst fears did, in fact, materialize, I see them now as ‘an abyss and mass of mercies,’ appointed and assigned by a loving and merciful Father who sees the end from the beginning. He asks us to trust him.”²¹

I want to quote a longer section of an article she wrote in 1976 titled, *How to Deal with the Death of a Loved One*.

The second thing I try to do is to give thanks. I cannot thank God for the murder of one or the excruciating disintegration of another, but I can thank God for the promise of his presence. I can thank him that he is still in charge, in the face of life’s worst terrors, and that “this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us [not ‘us for’] an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.”

Then I try to refuse self-pity. I know of nothing more paralyzing, more deadly, than self-pity. It is a death that has no resurrection, a sink-hole from which no rescuing hand can drag you because you have chosen to sink. But it must be refused. In order to refuse it, of course, I must recognize it for what it is. Amy Carmichael, in her sword-thrust of a book *If*, wrote, “If I make much of anything appointed, magnify it secretly to myself or insidiously to others, then I know nothing of Calvary love.” That’s a good definition of self-pity—making much of the “appointed,” magnifying it, dwelling on one’s own losses, looking with envy on those who appear to be more fortunate than



oneself, asking “why me, Lord” (remembering the “weight of glory” ought to be a sufficient answer to that question). It is one thing to call a spade a spade, to acknowledge that this thing is indeed suffering. It’s no use telling yourself its nothing. When Paul called it a “slight” affliction he meant it only by comparison with the glory. But it’s another thing to regard one’s own suffering as uncommon, or disproportionate, or undeserved.

The last of the helps I have found is to do something for somebody else. There is nothing like definite, overt action to overcome the inertia of grief.²²

She dealt with the suffering of others as it affected her but the last ten years of her life she walked through her own suffering. In 2004, this intelligent, faithful and wise woman developed dementia. As she worsened, as is common, she got less and less talkative. Her husband of 38 years said that she has handled dementia just as she did the deaths of her husbands. World magazine reported: her husband said that “she accepted those things, [knowing] they were no surprise to God. It was something she would rather not have experienced, but she received it.”



Hearing these words, Elliot looked up and nodded, her eyes clear and strong. Then she spoke for the first time during the two-hour interview, nodding vigorously: “Yes.”²³

The real hero in her life was her husband. How ironic that she lost two husbands, one to a violent murder and the other to a vigorous cancer. But her third husband cared for her in her waning and difficult days.

I want to conclude this biography of Elisabeth Elliot by singing a verse from a hymn and then playing a short video. The five missionaries sang this hymn on the morning of January 3, three days before they were speared to death. They were camped in the jungle awaiting one last flight to the Auca villages. Picture them signing this at the top of their lungs on a beach as they turn all of their trust to the Lord. ([Here is the entire hymn and music](#))

“We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender,
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor
Victors, we rest with Thee through endless days.”
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor
Victors, we rest with Thee through endless days.”²⁴

[This video is an example of modern missions](#) into unreached people groups. I show it in honor of the sacrifice of women like Elisabeth Elliot and others.

May we learn from Elisabeth’s life and desire to carry forth the ministry of “the mirror and the shirt.”

Rich Maurer
November 1, 2015

¹ Elisabeth Elliot, *Passion and Purity: Learning to Bring Your Love Life Under Christ's Control*, Fleming H. Revell, Grand Rapids, © 1984, p. 52.

² Elliot, Elisabeth (2002-07-08). *Through Gates of Splendor* (Kindle Locations 135-136). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

³ Through the Gates of Splendor.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1960/january-4/operation-auca-four-years-after-martyrdoms.html>

⁶ <https://urbana.org/blog/my-roommate-jim-elliott>

⁷ Through the Gates of Splendor, p. 16.

⁸ Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, © 1958, p. 124.

⁹ <https://www.wordnik.com/words/Auca>

¹⁰ <http://www.cowart.info/AucasTheWorstPeopleOnEarth.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1960/january-4/operation-auca-four-years-after-martyrdoms.html>

¹² Through the Gates of Splendor.

¹³ Passion and Purity.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1960/january-4/operation-auca-four-years-after-martyrdoms.html>

¹⁶ Elisabeth Elliot, *Quest for Love*, Fleming H. Revell: Grand Rapids, p. 185.

¹⁷ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/october/23.51.html>

¹⁸ Elisabeth Elliot, *On Asking God Why*, Fleming H. Revell: Grand Rapids, ©1989, p. 18.

¹⁹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/january/30.38.html>

²⁰ Passion and Purity, p. 85.

²¹ Quest for Love, p. 134.

²² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1976/february-27/ones-who-are-left.html>

²³ http://www.worldmag.com/2014/02/walking_through_fire

²⁴ Through the Gates of Splendor.