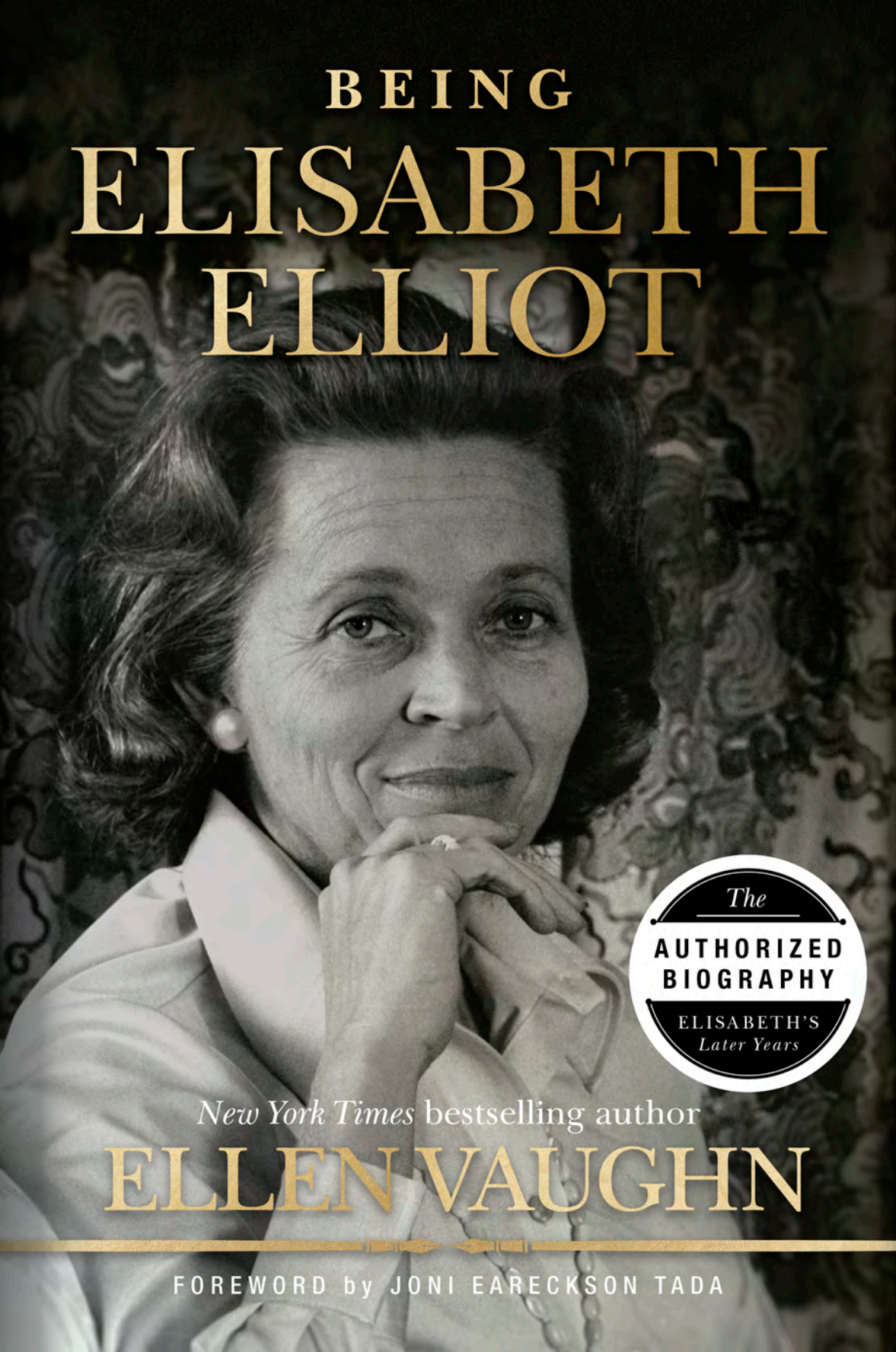
BEING ELISABETH ELLIOT



The AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY ELISABETH'S *Later Years*

New York Times bestselling author

ELLEN VAUGHN

FOREWORD by JONI EARECKSON TADA

BEING ELISABETH ELLIOT

BEING ELISABETH ELLIOT

ELLEN VAUGHN

B&H PUBLISHING
BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

Printed in China

978-1-0877-5099-6

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Brentwood, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: B
Subject Heading: ELLIOT, ELISABETH / MISSIONARIES /
WOMEN AUTHORS

Cover design by B&H Publishing Group. Cover photo used with permission of Elisabeth Elliot Foundation; photographer unknown. Flap photo: Courtesy of Buswell Library Archives & Special Collections, Wheaton College, IL. Cover decorative ornament © Vector Market/ Shutterstock. Author photo by Jonathan Whitten.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 • 27 26 25 24 23

"If the book we are reading does not wake us,
as with a fist hammering on our skulls, then why do
we read it? Good God, we also would be happy if we
had no books and such books that make us happy we could,
if need be, write ourselves. What we must have are those
books that come on us like ill fortune. . . . A book must
be an ice axe to break the sea frozen inside us."

—Franz Kafka, quoted in Elisabeth Elliot's
journal, October 30, 1978

In memory of and gratitude for
Lee Vaughn

March 29, 1958–July 20, 2022

"The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away;
blessed be the name of the LORD."
(Job 1:21 ESV)

Contents

Foreword

*I*t is no secret that I adore Elisabeth Elliot. After a broken neck nearly did me in, her no-nonsense way of living and robust theology of suffering mercifully yanked me back from the edge of despair. She taught me how to wake up in the morning, sit up in my wheelchair, and face life with courage.

In some ways, our stories parallel each other. My quadriplegia fettered me to the dark companion of suffering and like Elisabeth, I wrote extensively on the subject. One of my earliest books included a list of the thirty-five good biblical reasons as to why God allows affliction and how you can benefit from it—a refined faith, a deeper prayer life, and compassion for others, to name just three. I asked Elisabeth to offer an endorsement, which she did. But in her reply, she confessed that although the book was very satisfactory, it was a bit technical. And slightly mechanistic.

I was crushed. I remember thinking, *She's written so much on suffering; how could she not laud its benefits?* After another decade of paralysis I saw what she meant. Searing, jaw-splitting pain was added to the mix, making my disability feel like a walk in the park. I realized then there was far more to Christian growth than having confidence in God's reasons for suffering. Life was more complex and mysterious than I thought.

Perhaps in her reply to me, this is what Elisabeth was getting at. She was the elder conveying to the younger that life is never neatly packaged. That suffering will squeeze you like a lemon, spurting out the true stuff of which you are made, stuff that surprises and shocks even you. That life is a flow of feelings, frailties, and failures and that only by confessing our brokenness do we truly engage with our suffering Savior. That the strongest saints are weak and needy.

You will discover this when you turn the pages of *Being Elisabeth Elliot*. Our hero of the faith was not a bronze statue, impervious to fissures; nor was she an airbrushed paragon of virtue, untested by the things that thwart and frustrate us all. Elisabeth owned her flesh-and-blood shortcomings and would bristle whenever people insisted on putting her on a pedestal.

Yes, after tragedy upon tragedy, she became a hero to us all. But as with any hero worth her weight, she would set people straight who idolized her, pointing them to the only hero who will never let us down, Jesus Christ.

My good friend Ellen Vaughn has been charged with the daunting task of showing us this side of Elisabeth Elliot. It's a painfully poignant side. Relatable and approachable. There aren't many authors skillful enough to write honestly, yet gracefully about such a beloved Christian stateswoman as the remarkable Elisabeth Elliot. But Ellen takes the prize. This *New York Times* bestselling author has written numerous books with Chuck Colson, with Greg Laurie on the book, now film *Jesus Revolution*, a powerful biography of Mama Maggie—the Mother Teresa of Egypt who cares for the poor in the garbage slums of Cairo, as well as many other beautiful books.

Relying on Elisabeth's private journals and never-before-published letters, Ellen takes us beyond the life of Elisabeth the young idealist and opens our eyes to the warm-hearted disciple of Jesus who was honest enough to acknowledge how much she did not understand.

This is why this book touches me so. I've lived more than half a century with immense suffering and with a constant need of Jesus, yet I still do not have life figured out. I am forever being tested by things that thwart and stalk us all. I have lain awake at night and thought, *Lord, is this how I am to do life, is this right?* The older I get, the more I deal in the realm of the unknown, and like Elisabeth, the more I am certain of just a few things—God's unfathomable grace and the astonishing delight of Christ toward His people.

Turn the page and discover how a young seer of suffering, fresh-from-the-mission-field, learned the art of *Being Elisabeth Elliot*. Delight in the "impenetrable mystery," as she put it, of the complex and beautiful enigma God has willed for you and me. And if He has dealt you a bewildering hand, play your cards with courage. God will show you what life is all about.

Joni Eareckson Tada
Joni and Friends International Disability Center
March 2023

PART ONE

Bedrock

CHAPTER 1

Certainty

"The Christian realizes that his true identity is a mystery known only to God, . . . and that any attempt at this stage on the road of discipleship to define himself is bound to be blasphemous and destructive of that mysterious work of God forming Christ in him by the power of the Holy Spirit."
—Elisabeth Elliot

I feel perfectly certain that I shall never marry again," Elisabeth Elliot declared early in 1956.

It had been nine days since her muscular young husband and his four fellow missionaries had been speared to death by members of a remote tribal people in the Amazon jungle.

"No doubt all new widows make that statement," Elisabeth continued. "But I feel sure in my heart."[1]

But "perfect certainties," even among the most disciplined and celebrated of God's saints, sometimes shift in the face of His surprises.

After Jim and his colleagues died, Elisabeth remained in Ecuador for seven more years. Improbably, she trekked deep into the jungle with her tiny daughter and a colleague and lived among the Waodani[2] people who had killed her husband and friends. Many of the Waodani embraced a new way of living. News reports called her a "missionary hero," a brave widow carrying the gospel to those who had never heard it.

But this brave widow struggled. A lot. Painful personality conflicts with her fellow missionary compelled her to leave the Waodani. She worked among the Quichua people for a time, living in the house that her late husband had built in a mission station called Shandia. Her days advanced like a series of photos on a screen.

But in mid-1963, the setting of those images changed. The green eastern jungle of Ecuador became the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Little Valerie Elliot no longer frolicked naked in the river with her Waodani friends; now she wore plaid jumpers and rode a yellow school bus to elementary school each day. The grass hut in the jungle, and the mildewing wooden home that Jim built in Shandia, gave way to the house that Elisabeth designed, a streamlined structure with an enormous picture window overlooking Mount Lafayette. The days of translating the New Testament into Quichua or lounging in a woven hammock with Waodani women—puzzling over their indecipherable language and swatting flies—became a life of hunching over a typewriter, swatting interruptions and struggling to get English words on a page for a publisher's deadline. The missionary who had written a few books now purposed to be a "serious" writer who used to be a missionary. It was hard work.

There was no more *chicha* drunk by the campfire from a common, hollowed gourd among the tribal people. Now Elisabeth's tribe was the laconic New England laborer who cleared her field and dug her well, the wool-clad neighbor who taught her to ski, and the erudite crowd at New York cocktail parties, sipping gimlets. The small jungle campfire, with its background chatter of equatorial birds, became a crackling blaze in her own stone fireplace, the acres of woods beyond her window cloaked in a silent shroud of snow. Rather than running through the jungle at night, the lay midwife called to attend crisis births, now Elisabeth flew on Boeing jets toward speaking engagements at conventions and seminars, a sought-after public figure.

Eventually, the loneliness of a passionate woman who dreamed in the jungle of her lost lover Jim became the surprise of a new love that swept her right off her feet. Her earlier "certainty" about remarriage melted. A middle-aged Elisabeth Elliot, the financially independent writer and speaker, now shivered to the touch of Addison Leitch, the university professor, theologian, and writer with whom she had fallen desperately in love. They married on the first day of January 1969.

But the story, like Elisabeth's married life with Jim Elliot, would not end on that happy note.

The death of a loved one can come fast or slow. The sudden loss is devastating, a free fall through space where the mind cannot catch up with the physical reality of the death. With the gradual loss, perhaps the mind has time to "get used" to the idea of the loved one's departure before it occurs. The problem is, we never become accustomed to death's cruel theft of the one we love, whether it is a sudden robbery, so to speak, or a long, slow, embezzlement.

Once stunned by the joy of new love, now she was widowed again. Another death. But her widowhood would not define her, particularly since she would marry a third time in 1979. Her life rolled on, decade by decade, until her own death in 2015.

Her earlier years, related in *Becoming Elisabeth Elliot*, traced the transition of a young woman who dealt in "certainties" to the older woman who dealt, far too often, in the realm of uncertainties and the unknown. Now, *being* Elisabeth Elliot increasingly meant understanding how much she did not understand. She was certain of very few things—the good and holy character of God, His redeeming love, and merciful faithfulness. She sought her reference point beyond her own experiences, always pondering what she called the "impenetrable mystery" of the interplay between God's will and human choices.

It is that strange mystery which shaped the next portion of her startling life story.

CHAPTER 2

An Irregular Stone

"Here, then, is as much of the truth as one biographer could discover about a [person]. Let the reader find as much of its meaning as he [or she] can."
—Elisabeth Elliot, in her biography
of missionary Kenneth Strachan, 1968

I first met Elisabeth Elliot's cheerful daughter, Valerie, when Val and her husband, Walt, drove a pickup truck several hundred miles from their home to mine. The flatbed overflowed with boxes, cartons, photo albums, and crates of an ancient invention called cassette tapes. We hauled it all into my home office.

We laughed, talked, and ate pork tenderloin, asparagus, and roasted red potatoes. Then Val and Walt had to hit the road, bound for the home of one of their eight children. I left the dishes for my kind husband and crept into my office, pulling open the boxes as if it was Christmas morning.

Here were Elisabeth Elliot's journals, stacks of them filled with her firm, flowing handwriting, recounting her days from her childhood through the next six decades. Her baby book, reams of personal correspondence written with faded blue ink and a flourishing script, carbon copies of typewritten letters, dozens of notebooks filled with monthly expenses. There were lists of Christmas gifts given and received each year, books read, and shopping lists. There were notes for speeches, notes for seminary classes she taught, personal devotionals, scrapbooks with flaking, yellowed pages, and loose photographs, the glue that had once held them to the page long gone. And here was Jim Elliot's Bible, and his hand-drawn maps of the great eastern jungle of Ecuador. Here were the famous black-and-white photographs taken

after Jim and his fellow missionaries were killed. I had seen them all before, of course, in books and magazines. But these were the originals. I laid it all out, wearing gloves like an archeologist, on six-foot Costco tables I'd set up in my office. Heaps of buried treasure.

As I picked through these treasures over the weeks and months that followed, Elisabeth's strong voice spoke from the past. She often made me laugh. She sometimes surprised me, and as I later questioned her family and friends about some of those surprises, I heard stories I had not expected. There were hidden realities that would mar the shiny surface of a tidy story, ripples of ruptured relationships, difficult dysfunctions: in short, the disorderly challenges that face real people in the real world. It's just that I hadn't expected they would be part of the life of Elisabeth Elliot, a woman renowned for her sense of order and decorum.

Her life was full of paradoxes. A spiritual rebel when she returned to the United States from her time in Ecuador, she later became a conservative evangelical standard-bearer, though she was no prude. She regarded both heterosexual and homosexual attraction full of compassion. This might surprise those who might assume she would shriek and judge any temptation or behavior aside from a life of unsullied purity. A fiercely independent woman, in her third marriage she yoked herself to a definition of marital submission that many of us would question. In her older years, this woman known for her diffidence and monosyllabic personal interactions with strangers at speaking events and book signings, became a beloved "mother figure" to thousands who had never met her. Her advice heeded by tens of thousands of radio show listeners, she made some surprisingly sad personal mistakes.

Did any of this disqualify my interest in Elisabeth Elliot? Far from it. I loved her as a fellow pilgrim on the trail. Her story echoed parts of my own, and I found it all to be redemptive.

So, as an earnest but doomed biographer, I had a choice. I could write a victorious, "inspirational" white-washed story, always a popular option in many Christian circles. Or I could tell it straight. I thought about the Bible. Surely its authors would have produced a far less puzzling book if they had omitted certain stories, the ones that we just don't tend to read to our children. Some Old Testament protagonists were masters of duplicity. Sarah, Rachel, and Tamar: clever and deceptive. Noah singlehandedly saved humanity from the global flood, and then got drunk and naked on his own new grapes. Some kids—well, forty-two of them—made fun of the prophet Elisha's bald head as he walked down a path, and he basically called forth judgment

upon them. Two female bears obligingly emerged from the forest and mauled them all.

There are also forthright accounts of agonizing human frailty and brokenness. Eve and Adam disobeyed God and lost Paradise. Just as we would. Jesus's friend Peter, who had lived with Christ for three years, denied that he even knew Him just before the crucifixion.

If Scripture had been made up to support a humanly engineered religion, it would have been far glossier and more palatable to human readers. Its very scandals—most notably, the scandal of the Cross—offer evidence of its authenticity. It is a real book about a supernatural God mysteriously invading the stories of real people. Outside of radical revision, the Bible would not make it as a cheerful Hallmark movie.

As Elisabeth wrote in 1968, "Possibly there is no better model for biography than the Bible. There it is perfectly plain that a true understanding of the world is not to be gained by pretending that things are other than what they are. If there is good, let it not be exaggerated. If there are evils, let us see what they are, and, if we will, let us bring to bear upon them the light of a Biblical faith, but let us not operate as though they simply did not exist and therefore needed no redemption."[1]

There is great virtue in truth, told with love. Flawed and relatable protagonists showcase the supernatural power of God. We all resonate with them, as opposed to the dull and caricatured folk of fake religiosity.

This is just a biography. It's not the Bible. I saw pieces of Elisabeth's story that had not made it into her public speaking, nor her books about families, men and women, and faith. I wish she had included them; the story would have been all the richer, brimming with God's grace. She was a human being, after all, not some flawless, gleaming captain in the army of God. I puzzled over some of the broken relationships, the falsehoods that had been perpetrated, not deliberately, but by assumptions that had rolled onward for years with an energy all their own. The story was made more difficult to tell, too, because some of her meticulously numbered journals and key pieces of correspondence were missing. I did not know why.

I began to realize that I should warn my readers: If you want the expected version of Elisabeth Elliot's story, don't read this book. Find another, more predictable version.

I do not want to create a melodrama, with one-dimensional saints and villains. I do not want to titillate with a tell-all. I do not want to offend, or smear, or gush, or get it wrong. I do not want to write this book, partially because I know I will need to insert more of my own voice in the account.

Elisabeth's early years, the subject matter of Volume 1 of this two-part biography, lent themselves to a discernable narrative arc. That story had a beginning, middle, and end, and Elisabeth's years in Ecuador brimmed with color and drama.

Her later years were no less dramatic, but they were more psychologically complex. In the 1960s Elisabeth articulated views that would likely shock some of her followers of the 1980s and '90s, while they might relieve some of her critics.

As with a film, it's all a matter of the editing and what one leaves on the cutting room floor, so to speak. I could choose scenes and writings from Elisabeth's life that would present her one way. Or I could choose other selections and spin it the other way. We could all say, ah, yes, Elisabeth Elliot, she was *this*. Or *that*. Choose your tag line; post your tweet.

Miserable with the responsibility of it all, I was strangely comforted by Elisabeth's one novel, published in 1966. It was not particularly popular. *No Graven Image* evoked the idols we so easily establish in our lives, particularly the religious constructs that codify God and resist any complexity and mystery. We presume to speak for God, the god we assume shares not only our political and social views, but our *taste*. The god of the bumper sticker, the hashtag, the slogan. The one who is on our side. Never mind if we are on God's side.

It's nothing new that we tend to do this with the Almighty. The concurrent problem, of course, is that we do it with each other. It is so easy to divide the world into "Us" and "Them," and to demonize the other side. As long as there is an enemy, we can raise money and gain adherents for our cause. As long as we see people as one or two-dimensional, we can typecast them. Ah. He was a great hero . . . but then the statue—the graven image—topples, and he was just a villain. We look up to someone as a spokesperson for our movement . . . but then the secret sin emerges, and we don't know where to look. We admire someone, and it turns out she hated golden retrievers, and it's all over. We long for heroes without complexity, heroes without aspects that we just don't like and can't admire. We want images, the noble, gleaming statue without the pigeon poop.

But among human heroes, these just do not exist.

There is a movement today that seems to suggest that perfect virtue is possible, and that any human being with any flaws must be dragged down. Given those standards, the movement itself cannot stand; utopian views about human nature always prove untenable in the end.

There is only one Hero who does not disappoint. As for the rest of us, we must be strangely content to see people as they are, courageous

and terrified, noble and petty, discerning and blind. In it all, among the best of our lot, there is plenty to admire and plenty to strive for; the rest is simply cause, as always, to look to God and praise Him for His amazing grace that He would save "wretches like us" as the old hymn says. Our legacies as individuals are not so much about the trophies we win in our short lives, because that so easily leads to pride. Rather, the legacy of our brokenness and need for Christ highlights His eternal, golden mercies.

Martin Luther is one of those complex figures who changed the course of human history. We all know he was famously flawed. Brilliant, stubborn, in love with God and His Scriptures, fond of ale, subject to depression, anger, and the source of scurrilous, horrifying hate speech against certain people groups. What do we do? Cancel him?

Luther thoughtfully provided the key for the rest of us: his dying words. *We are all beggars*. Elisabeth Elliot would shout out an "amen to that, brother," if she was the sort of person who shouted amens, which she was not. But we are all poor, restless, needy people, right down to the end of this perplexing life. We have no merit on our own, no wealth of good deeds in our pockets that God counts up and, mollified, lets us in. No, we're all beggars. Vagrants. Bums. Yet what awaits us is the great Feast of grace God offers on the other side, where Martin Luther and Elisabeth Elliot and a host of other imperfect heroes sit today, passing the platters and praising the Lord.

Early in my research process, I visited the North Shore of Boston. Elisabeth had lived for many years in Magnolia, Massachusetts, in a cozy home overlooking the cold, gray sea. At the time her third husband, Lars Gren, still lived there. I had various visits, both puzzling and friendly, with him, as well as rich conversations with Elisabeth's younger brother, Tom, various close friends, and other relatives in the area. I had much to sort out.

One afternoon I drove to the church where Elisabeth had worshipped during her older years, the First Congregational Church of Hamilton. It had been established in 1713, sixty-three years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a little parish church in the tiny hamlet that eventually became Hamilton, Massachusetts.

I parked and walked across the road to the church's graveyard. It was a glorious, sky-blue day. Sunshine filtered through the soaring, old trees above me; small American flags fluttered in the breeze. The grave markers were all different sizes and shapes. Some marked the lives of those who had fought in the Revolutionary War; other stones commemorated men and women, boys and girls, who had lived their lives and died in the centuries since.

I had looked up the location of Elisabeth Elliot's grave and walked toward the rear of the long cemetery. No one else was around.

The gravestone was a big, irregularly shaped, smooth boulder with Elisabeth's name and one of her favorite verses engraved upon it. "When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee." She is buried with Addison Leitch, whose inscription reads, "loved husband and best friend of Elisabeth." This is interesting, given the fact that she was married to Addison for less than five years and to Lars for more than three decades. I decided to think about that later.

I sat down, my back against the sun-warmed stone. I thought of the flawed saints who have gone before us, all those biblical characters and men and women of faith down through the ages. I leaned on that boulder and thought of the irregular shapes of all our stories, how God redeems us all, and that somewhere in heaven, so close and yet so far, all is calm, and all is well. My mind drifted in the breeze, up toward the dappled light. *So, then, God,* I prayed, *how do You want me to tell Elisabeth's story?*

He did not audibly answer. Neither did Elisabeth Elliot, her bones underneath the green sod and the big stone on which I leaned. Presumably, they both had better things to do.

I breathed deep, stretched, and got to my feet. My eyes fell on the gravestone behind Elisabeth's. I don't know why I was drawn to it, as its back side was facing me. But I walked a few paces, knelt, and pulled away the long grass that was obscuring the inscription near its base. I read the deep-carved words.

"The truth, in love."

That was all.

I took it as a message, a guiding principle, as I began the journey of writing these biographies about the life and death of Elisabeth Elliot. *Tell the truth, in love.*

So that is what I have endeavored to do.

ELISABETH ELLIOT was a young missionary in Ecuador when members of a remote Amazonian indigenous people group killed her husband Jim and his four colleagues. And yet, she stayed in the jungle with her young daughter to minister to the very people who had thrown the spears, demonstrating the power of Christ's forgiveness.

This courageous, no-nonsense Christian went on to write dozens of books, host a long-running radio show, and speak at conferences all over the world. She was a pillar of coherent, committed faith–a beloved and sometimes controversial icon. And while things in the limelight might have looked golden, her suffering continued refining her in many different and unexpected ways.

Her early years, related in *Becoming Elisabeth Elliot*, traced the transition of a young woman who dealt in "certainties" to the woman who lived with the unknown.

Now, being Elisabeth Elliot increasingly meant confronting how much she did not understand. She sought her reference point beyond her own experiences, always pondering what she called the "impenetrable mystery" of the interplay between God's will and human choices.

And it is that strange mystery which shaped the rest of her startling life story.

B&H
BHPUBLISHING.COM

BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY/Religious
978-1-0877-5099-6
Printed in China $24.99 USD
52499
9 781087 750996