

2015/3: Tribute To Elisabeth Elliot (1926-2015)

by BS Poh

Elisabeth Elliot died on 15 June 2015, at the age of 88. When my eldest son messaged by telephone, “Elisabeth Elliot passed away”, I responded, “Aii... the Lord has called home a choice servant.” I lingered over the thought for a while, thinking back what her life has meant to me, and many, many others around the world.

Her influence

I was a new convert to Christ from a Buddhist background, studying Electronics Engineering in the University of Liverpool. UK. God, in His providence, gave me a strong interest in missions from the beginning of my Christian life. I was involved in Christian Union activities at university, being a member of its Missions Committee for two years. The systematic teaching in a Reformed Baptist church convinced me of the importance of a good grounding in doctrine. I attended night classes at a Bible College, while being heavily involved in student outreach and attending church regularly. This continued on until I finished graduate studies - a total of six years of tertiary education - by which time I completed my Bible College course as well, obtaining a Diploma in Religious Studies from the University of Cambridge.

By the time I finished studies, it was clear that I should serve the Lord back in my country of Malaysia. I did not lose that sense of burden for missions. My ministry would not be in the jungles of Africa or South America. It would be in my own homeland - with a heart for missions. Among the books that have been most influential to me in my early Christian life, three stand out. They are “Through Gates of Splendor” by Elisabeth Elliot, “Too Hard for God?” by CR Marsh, and “Tortured for Christ” by Richard Wurmbrand. These books instilled in me a desire to live the committed Christian life, and the resolve not to lose the missionary spirit. Coupled with the doctrinal grounding I received in church, I came back to Malaysia ready to do pioneering work. (Brief accounts of our service in Malaysia are in 2008 Articles, Gospel Highway, www.ghmag.net.)

Her life

The book “Through Gates of Splendor” chronicles how Jim and Elisabeth Elliot evangelized the Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador. My personal copy of the book was lent out and never returned. Without recourse to referring back to the book, I can recall a number of striking incidents in it. One concerns how the young couple, Jim and Elisabeth, sought God’s will with regard to their marriage before going to South America as missionaries. They committed their relationship to God in prayer, and were willing to accept God’s will if they were not meant for each other - the sign being that they were assigned to different mission fields on completion of college. As it turned out, they were sent to the same mission field.

Another incident concerns how the couple and their missionary colleagues developed the system of dropping food supplies by missionary aircraft to remote regions. The aircraft would circle in the air, with the package of supplies hung down from a rope. The centrifugal force of the circling aircraft would bring the package to a standstill, which allowed it to be dropped with precision to the desired spot. I was to suggest this method to the Japanese embassy in Kuala Lumpur when the Japanese

government struggled to drop water to their over-heated nuclear plant at Fukushima in Japan, in 2011. They apparently tried out the method, before parts of giant water pumps arrived from abroad, were assembled, and used instead.

Yet another incident I remember is that during the last meeting of the missionaries in their jungle home, before Jim Elliot went out and was speared to death, the hymn they sung was “We rest on Thee”. In the edition of “Through Gates of Splendor” which I had, there were black-and-white pictures, one of which was of the weary Elisabeth Elliot carrying on her hip the young daughter, Val, taken after the martyrdom of her husband. Killed at the same time was Nate Saint. A picture of one of the bodies floating at the river bank showed a spear sticking through it. Another picture was of their missionary colleague, seated in grief with hands in his hair. Our church sings “We rest on Thee” to the tune “Finlandia”. Apart from the fact that the stirring words of the hymn are based on Asa’s stirring prayer in 2 Chronicles 14:11, this hymn always reminds me of Jim Elliot’s death. You would understand why the singing of this hymn always sends a thrill through me.

Her legacy

Through the writings of Elisabeth Elliot, the sayings that embody the spirit of Jim Elliot and herself have spread far and wide, to strengthen, comfort and inspire many. “Leave it all in the hands that were wounded for you.” “If you believe in a God who controls the big things, you have to believe in a God who controls the little things.” “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” There are many more such quotable quotes.

Amazingly, Elisabeth Elliot continued on as a missionary in the tribe that killed her husband and Nate Saint. In the seven years among the Auca and Quichua Indians, she saw the fruit of her labours or, rather, the fruit of the blood of the martyrs. The men who killed Jim Elliot and Nate Saint were among the converts. She returned to the United States in 1963. In 1969 she married her second husband, seminary professor Addison Leitch. He died four years later from cancer. She married Lars Gren in 1977. Elisabeth Elliot stopped giving speeches in 2004 when she realized that she was losing her memory, as dementia set in. Lars Gren had been her faithful caretaker to the end.

The book “Through Gates of Splendor” is required reading in our “Discipleship Training Programme” - a weekly book-reading session for the young people in our church. I have highly recommended other books by Elisabeth Elliot, including “Shadow of the Almighty”, “The Life and Testimony of Jim Elliot”, “Passion and Purity”, “Let Me be a Woman”, and “The Mark of a Man”. Theologically, Elisabeth Elliot belongs to the conservative evangelical school whose values cut across denominational lines. It is to one’s loss for not valuing and reading her books. Elisabeth Elliot’s later books on missions, viz. “No Graven Image” and “The Savage, My Kinsman” are said to make a definite contribution to missiology.

In 2001, while driving with Pr. Fred Malone from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to Mansfield, Texas, to a Christian conference, we heard Elisabeth Elliot on radio. How my spirit lit up! I said to Pr. Malone that if ever Elisabeth Elliot were to travel to our part of the world, our church would invite her to speak to us. I knew that she would not want to preach in our pulpit, but it would be “a single privilege, a double honour, and a triple pleasure” to have her address us. Pr. Malone smiled. (You might want to listen to one of her messages, given at a ladies’ luncheon, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=20&v=t-FH2izFozk> .)

We in Malaysia join the countless number of friends around the world in extending our condolences to Elisabeth Elliot’s husband Lars Gren, her daughter Val and son-in-law Walt, and her eight grandchildren. We join them in thanking our God for giving her to us for a time. Elisabeth Elliot was a true servant of God, a trophy of God’s amazing grace. To God be all the glory!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~