

Jim Elliot: He Was No Fool



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Introduction

Jesus said in Matthew 10:39: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” On January 8, 1956, five young men, all married, four of them fathers, lost their lives for Jesus’ sake on a beach along the Curaray River in the northwestern South America country of Ecuador.¹ One of the five was 28-year-old Jim Elliot, who, over six years earlier, on October 28, 1949, wrote in his journal: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”² Elliot, along with Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Nate Saint, and Roger Youderian, gave what he could not keep (his temporal, earthly life) in order to gain what he could not lose (eternal, heavenly reward). This is his story, the story of the sacrifice of a life for Christ.

Birth and Childhood

Jim Elliot was born on October 8, 1927, in Portland, Oregon, the third of four children³ born to Fred & Clara Elliot.⁴ On August 8, 1950, based on the words of Psalm 127:3-5, Jim would write to his parents: “Grieve not, then, if your sons seem to desert you, but rejoice, rather, seeing the will of God done gladly. Remember how the Psalmist described children? He said that they were as an heritage from the Lord, and that every man should be happy who has a quiver full of them. And what is a quiver full of but arrows? And what are arrows for but to shoot? So, with the strong arms of prayer, draw the bowstring back and let the arrows fly--all of them, straight at the Enemy’s hosts.”

Jim professed faith in Christ at the age of 6. After doing so, he told his mom (cited in Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, pp. 25-26): “Now, mama, the Lord Jesus can come whenever He wants. He could take our whole family, because I’m saved now, and Janie [Jim’s baby sister] is too young to know about Him yet.”

¹Ecuador is bordered by Columbia to the north, Peru to the east and south, and the Pacific Ocean to the west.

²It is likely that Elliot derived this statement from what Philip Henry (father of the famous commentator, Matthew Henry) once said: “He is no fool who parts with that which he cannot keep, when he is sure to be recompensed with that which he cannot lose.”

³Jim’s siblings were older brothers, Bob and Bert (who would become a missionary to Peru) and younger sister, Jane.

⁴Jim’s father was a Plymouth Brethren evangelist, his mother a chiropractor. “Fred Elliot read the Bible to his children every day and prayed *with* them as well as *for* them” (Susan Martins Miller, *Jim Elliot: Missionary to Ecuador*, p. 21; emphasis hers).

In 1941, Jim began attending Portland's Benson Polytechnic High School, where he played football and participated in the school plays. He was known as a bold believer, always having his Bible on top of the stack of textbooks he carried to class.

Marriage and Fatherhood

Marriage

Jim met his future wife, Elisabeth Howard (a fellow Greek major from New Jersey and a daughter of missionaries) while both were students at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois (Elisabeth was a member of the class of 1948, Jim the class of 1949). Elisabeth, like Jim, had committed herself to serving the Lord as a vocational, foreign missionary. After a years-long romantic relationship⁵, they were engaged on January 31, 1953⁶ and married in Quito, Ecuador on October 8 of the same year, Jim's 26th birthday.⁷

Fatherhood

God gave Jim and Elisabeth one child, a daughter, Valerie, born on the mission field of Ecuador (in the home of fellow missionaries, Nate and Marj Saint) on February 27, 1955.

College Years and Beyond

In the fall of 1945, Jim left home to attend Wheaton College⁸, majoring in Greek, believing it would prepare him for translating the Bible into the language of those he would one day seek to reach. While at Wheaton, Jim was a member of the wrestling team and was president of the Student Foreign Missions Fellowship his senior year. He was also known to spend Sunday afternoons traveling to the train stations of Chicago to witness to those waiting for a train. It was at Wheaton that Jim met fellow student, and future missionary partner, Ed McCully.

⁵For the story of their courtship, see Elisabeth Elliot's *Quest for Love*, one of several outstanding books written by this prolific author.

⁶Shortly after being engaged to Jim, Elisabeth was told she had advanced stage tuberculosis, which further testing a week later proved to be a false diagnosis.

⁷After Jim's death, Elisabeth would be married a second time, in 1969 to seminary professor, Addison Leitch, who died of cancer in 1973. She would then be married a third time, to hospital chaplain, Lars Gren in 1977. After a long bout with Alzheimer's, Elisabeth went home to heaven at age 88, on June 15, 2015.

⁸Jim lived off campus, with an aunt and uncle, his freshman year. He also lived off campus his sophomore year, though in a different location than his freshman year. At the time, Wheaton had a student population of about 1,500.

It was during these years that God began directing Jim to the mission field of Latin America. Just after his sophomore year at Wheaton, he spent six weeks in the summer of 1947 in Mexico, staying with a friend whose parents were missionaries there.

After his junior year, Jim spent part of the summer of 1948 traveling throughout the Midwest with a gospel team representing the Foreign Missions Fellowship.

After graduating from Wheaton, Jim returned to his family home in Portland, waiting upon the Lord's leading to a foreign field for missionary ministry. It was during this time that correspondence with Ecuadorian missionary, Wilfred Tidmarsh was used by God to point Jim towards the particular place.

In the summer of 1950, Jim further prepared for the foreign mission field by participating in a 10-week linguistics course at the University of Oklahoma, a course specifically designed to equip one to learn unwritten languages. The individual assigned to work with Jim was a former missionary to the Quichua Indians of Ecuador, who also told Jim about an unreached tribe called the Aucas (today called the Waoranis). This was another providential pointing to the place to which God was leading Jim.

In the first part of 1951, Jim and former Wheaton classmate, Ed McCully served together in evangelizing the small town of Chester, Illinois. That summer, after returning home to Portland, Jim was paid a visit by Wilfred Tidmarsh, a visit that further propelled Jim to the mission field of Ecuador.

To the Foreign Mission Field

In that same summer of 1951, Jim visited a family friend in Seattle, Pete Fleming. God used the visit to convince Pete to partner with Jim in the gospel in Ecuador. Early in 1952, the two of them sailed from California, arriving in Ecuador, after eighteen days at sea, on February 21, 1952. As the boat pulled up to the shore, they sang: "Faith of our Fathers, holy faith We will be true to thee till death" (Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, p. 24). So it would be.

Foreign Missionary Ministry in Ecuador

Jim first served in the city of Quito, with the primary focus being learning the language. That spring, God also led Elisabeth to Quito, where she would begin her Ecuadorian missionary service.

Later in 1952, God moved Jim to the Ecuadorian village of Shandia. His ministry in Shandia came to a close after a year due to the need for his presence in the village of Puyupungu, which in turn led to his marriage to Elisabeth, as Jim needed a helper for

the work there. In the middle of 1954, Jim, along with Elisabeth, returned to minister in Shandia.

Not only did those years see God bring Jim Elliot and Pete Fleming to Ecuador, but also Missionary Aviation Fellowship (hereafter, MAF) pilot, Nate Saint and his wife, Marj (in 1948), Ed McCully and his wife, Marilou (at the end of 1952); and Roger Youderian and his wife, Barbara (in 1953). In the summer of 1954, Pete Fleming briefly returned to the States to get married, returning to Ecuador with his wife, Olive. God eventually formed these five couples into a team, with the goal being getting the gospel to the Auca tribe, a reclusive tribe known for its savagery⁹ (Auca was a Quichua word that meant savagery).

In the fall of 1955, "Operation Auca" got off the ground, as survey flights by Nate Saint led to several sightings of Aucas, deep in the Amazonian jungle. Over the next several months, "Operation Auca" took flight, as the team weekly flew over the Auca area, giving (and sometimes receiving from the Aucas) gifts through an ingenious system devised by Saint that allowed such gifts to be exchanged through a rope that dangled to the ground while the plane piloted by Saint circled overhead. While making these flights, the men shouted friendly messages to the Aucas on the ground in their native tongue.

By the time 1956 arrived, the team determined it was time to attempt to make personal contact with the Aucas. So, over the course of several days at the start of the New Year, Saint ferried supplies and the other men of the team to a stretch of sand on the Curaray River deemed suitable as a landing strip, which they named "Palm Beach." The first of the men to arrive quickly built a treehouse, in which they slept the first few nights on the beach. By day, they cried out into the jungle in the Auca language, inviting the Aucas to visit them.

On Friday morning, January 6, three Aucas appeared on the other side of the river, one man and two women. Jim jumped into the river, swam across, then led the three guests to Palm Beach, where the men conversed with the three as best they could. The three eventually departed, but not before Nate took the male Auca (whom they nicknamed "George") on a ride in the plane over the Auca village.

On Sunday, January 8, while Saint was making a scouting flight over the Auca area, he noticed a group of Auca men heading toward Palm Beach. After quickly landing the

⁹For instance, in 1942 the Aucas had speared 3 Shell Oil Company employees to death. After losing 8 more workers at the hands of the Aucas the following year, the company pulled operations out of the area. The very first missionary known to have entered Auca territory was speared to death, in 1667.

plane, he radioed his wife, Marj, back at the MAF station in Shell Mera, at 12:30 pm, sharing the news of the imminent interaction and telling her they would make contact again at 4:30 pm to report on how it went. However, the 4:30 call never came.

Death and Legacy

When 4:30 pm on Sunday, January 8, 1956 came and went without a call from the men, and when Sunday turned to Monday, an MAF pilot flew to and over Palm Beach, immediately noticing that the bright yellow Piper Cruiser plane had been defaced and ultimately spotting the body of one of the missionaries in the Curaray. Subsequent searches by a team of American and Ecuadorian military personnel, as well as by some Quichuas, resulted in the discovery of the bodies of all five of the missionaries. Four of the five were eventually recovered, the body of Ed McCully having been washed away by the Curaray's current before it could be reached.¹⁰ The bodies of Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Nate Saint, and Roger Youderian, which, like McCully's, had been speared to death, were buried by the search and recovery team in the sands of Palm Beach.

The ensuing investigation revealed that the group of Auca men who met the missionaries on Palm Beach that Sunday afternoon came to kill, believing that the missionaries were cannibals, intent on killing the Aucas first.¹¹ Though the missionaries were armed with rifles, they had predetermined that they would not use them directly against the Aucas. The places at which the bodies of the missionaries were found, as well as the placement of the Auca spears in their bodies, showed that the missionaries had laid down their lives as martyrs.

Like other famous missionaries before him, such as David Brainerd and Bill Borden, though Jim Elliot lived a short life (28+ years), he left a long legacy. News of his death,

¹⁰Elliot (*Through Gates of Splendor*, p. 252) shares a touching tale, the words of Ed McCully's 3-year-old son, Stevie, after his dad's death: "I know my daddy is with Jesus, but I miss him, and I wish he would just come down and play with me once in a while." Once, when Stevie's baby brother, Matthew was crying, Stevie told him: "Never you mind; when we get to Heaven I'll show you which one is our daddy."

¹¹During the initial interaction with the three Aucas on Friday, January 6, one of the missionaries pulled out of his pocket and showed them a photograph of an Auca woman named Dayuma, who had fled from her people as a child and was found and raised by the neighboring Quichuas, and from whom the missionaries initially learned the language. Having no concept of what either a pocket or a photograph was, the Aucas wrongly surmised from this incident that the missionary had consumed Dayuma, leading to the erroneous assumption that the missionaries were cannibals.

and the deaths of his four gospel partners, spread throughout the world.¹² As a result, a myriad of men and women committed to foreign missionary ministry. Most of the wives continued ministering in Ecuador.¹³ Most notably, Elisabeth Elliot and Nate Saint's sister, Rachel Saint, starting in October of 1958, were able to live among and minister to the Aucas¹⁴, leading to the conversion of many, including several of the very men who had murdered their husband (in the case of Elisabeth) and brother (in the case of Rachel). By the early 1990s, the entire New Testament had been translated into Waorani. To this day, there remains a significant gospel presence among this formerly unreached (and, to some, unreachable) tribe.

Some Keys to His Success

His “Devotions”

Mention has already been made (in footnote 4) of the daily Bible intake Jim received as a child. This foundation of “family devotions” was undoubtedly the primary impetus of his “personal devotions,” spending regular time with the Lord in the Word and prayer. Much of the fruit of this time is reflected in the words he recorded in his journals. During his years at Wheaton, he was known for memorizing Bible verses, written on small cards that he kept in his pocket. He also kept a prayer-list notebook.

His Diary

Like many believers before and since (such as David Brainerd), Jim was in the habit of recording his devotional thoughts in a journal.¹⁵

Entries include the following excerpts:

¹²*Life* magazine covered the story in detail in its January 30, 1956 issue.

¹³After briefly returning to the States to give birth to her third child, Marilou McCully returned to Ecuador, setting up a home for missionary children in Quito. She was assisted in this endeavor by Marj Saint. Barbara Youderian returned to working with an Ecuadorian tribe of Indians known as the Jivaros.

¹⁴After her death, from cancer, in 1994, Rachel Saint's body was buried in the Auca area where she had lived and ministered.

¹⁵For a record of Elliot's journal entries, see *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life & Testament of Jim Elliot* by Elisabeth Elliot. Such reading is not only convicting, but also compelling and cleansing.

April 18, 1948: “Father, take my life, yea, my blood if Thou wilt, and consume it with Thine enveloping fire. I would not save it, for it is not mine to save. Have it Lord, have it all. Pour out my life as an oblation for the world” (cited in Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 240).

Summer 1948: “‘He makes His ministers a flame of fire.’ Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of ‘other things.’ Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame. But flame is transient, often short-lived. Canst thou bear this, my soul--short life? In me there dwells the Spirit of the Great Short-Lived, whose zeal for God’s house consumed Him. ‘Make me Thy Fuel, Flame of God’” (cited in Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, p. 18).

January 29, 1949: “God, I pray Thee, light these idle sticks of my life and may I burn up for Thee. Consume my life, my God, for it is Thine. I seek not a long life¹⁶ but a full one, like You, Lord Jesus” (cited in Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 55).

December 1951: “Only I know that my own life is full. It is time to die, for I have had all that a young man can have, at least all that this young man can have. I am ready to meet Jesus” (cited in Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 249).

The last thing he is known to have written in his journal is: “I walked out to the hill just now. It is exalting, delicious, to stand embraced by the shadows of a friendly tree with the wind tugging at your coattail and the heavens hailing your heart, to gaze and glory and give oneself again to God--what more could a man ask? Oh, the fullness, pleasure, sheer excitement of knowing God on earth! I care not if I never raise my voice again for Him, if only I may love Him, please Him. Mayhap in mercy He shall give me a host of children that I may lead them through the vast star fields to explore His delicacies whose finger ends set them to burning. But if not, if only I may see Him, touch His garments, and smile into His eyes--ah then, not stars nor children shall matter, only Himself. O Jesus, Master and Center and End of all, how long before that Glory is thine which has so long waited Thee? Now there is no thought of Thee among men; then there shall be thought for nothing else. Now other men are praised; then none shall care for any other’s merits. Hasten, hasten, Glory of Heaven, take Thy crown,

¹⁶Elliot had several brushes with death, including nearly being shot by an accidental discharge from a friend’s rifle, escaping a stalled car on a set of train tracks moments before the oncoming train destroyed it, surviving a rollover car accident, and nearly being swept off a cliff by a flood in Shandia, Ecuador.

subdue Thy kingdom, enthrall Thy creatures” (cited in Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, pp. 255-256).

His Dedication

Elliot was known to some as “one-track Jim.” He once wrote in his journal: “Wherever you are, *be all there*. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God” (cited in Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, p. 20).

His dedication was seen in his reasoning for being physically active. A high school classmate (cited in Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 32) testified: “One day near Jim’s last year in high school I saw him running around the outdoor track, training. I asked him what he was doing that for. He said, ‘Bodily exercise is profitable for a little’ [1 Timothy 4:8]. He was building his body for the rigors of missionary life.” When asked why he wrestled at Wheaton, Elliot replied: “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” (Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, p. 16).

At the core of Jim Elliot’s dedication was a commitment to a command, a Commission, the Great Commission. In typical Jim Elliot fashion, he once remarked: “We don’t need a call [to the mission field]; we need a kick in the pants” (cited in Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 54). He once wrote, in a letter to Pete Fleming: “The command is plain: you go into the whole world and announce the good news. It cannot be dispensationalized, typicalized, rationalized ... To me, Ecuador is simply an avenue of obedience to the simple word of Christ” (cited in Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 150). His last letter to his parents, written on December 28, 1955 read in part: “Our orders are ‘the gospel to every creature’” (cited in Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 243).

Also at the core of Jim Elliot’s dedication was a commitment to the concept that the gospel was to be communicated to those to whom it had yet to be communicated (Romans 15:20-21), so that some from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9) of the world would become worshippers of God (see also Revelation 7:9). The Auca tribe, though numbering only a few hundred at the time, was part of such people. Jim wrote in 1951: “The Scriptures indicate that God intends some from every tribe and tongue and people and nation to be there in the glory, sounding out the praises of the Redeemer. This is specific indication that the Gospel must be gotten to tribes

who are not yet included in the singing hosts. Hence my burden for cultural groups as yet untouched.”¹⁷

His Death

The Lord, Jesus Christ said in John 12:24: “ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” The early church historian, Tertullian said it like this: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

The life of Jim Elliot, along with the lives of the others among the five, was the seed that led to the birth of the church among the Aucas.

Years after the martyrdom of Elliot and his fellow missionaries, some of the Aucas told Elisabeth Elliot and Olive Fleming what they saw that day: “When the men were dead and their bodies lying on the beach, the Waoranis heard singing. ...[T]hey looked up over the tops of the trees and saw a large group of people singing. They described it by saying it looked like ‘a hundred flashlights’” (Miller, p. 195).

Conclusion

To the unenlightened, the premature deaths of five of God’s finest, cut down in the prime of life, seems like a colossal waste. Perhaps the best response to such a surmise is that of one of the five, Nate Saint, who once said: “People who do not know the Lord ask why in the world we waste our lives as missionaries. They forget that they too are expending their lives ... and when the bubble has burst they will have nothing of eternal significance to show for the years they have wasted.” Jim Elliot’s death, as his life, was not a waste. It was a witness, a witness to the worth of the One worth living for, and dying for. He died well because he lived well. As Elliot himself once said: “When it comes time to die, make sure that all you have to do ... is die.”¹⁸ He was no fool.

¹⁷Nate Saint, on December 18, 1955, likewise wrote in this regard: “As we weigh the future and seek the will of God, does it seem right that we should hazard our lives for just a few savages? As we ask ourselves this question, we realize that it is not the call of the needy thousands, rather it is the simple intimation of the prophetic Word that there shall be some from every tribe in His presence in the last day and in our hearts we feel that it is pleasing to Him that we should interest ourselves in making an opening into the Auca prison for Christ” (cited in Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, p. 176).

¹⁸Cited in Elliot, *Through Gates of Splendor*, p. 253.