

# The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter

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## *Called to Act*

Among the treasures in a box of old family papers, I found a series of letters from a great-aunt who was serving as a hostess in a rest house in Virginia during World War I. She was a lady unused to working for a living, but her husband had dropped dead one day at the bank where he worked, and she had to find a way to support herself. She had opened a home for soldiers and sailors, many of whom were terribly homesick, some of them just back from the front with permanent disabilities. The wives and mothers of men who had been killed sometimes arrived at the door in the middle of the night, having just received the sorrowful news. My great-aunt Alice Sparhawk took care of them all.

Her letters to her brother "Chigsie" (Charles Gallaudet Trumbull) are full of cheerfulness and compassion. She was busy helping others every minute of the day and often deep into the night. As I read her vivid and often humorous accounts of the daily routine, I remember the background of suffering against which she wrote—her own suffering (she could hardly bear to think of returning to the cheerful home where she and her husband Jack had lived) and that of so many others. But doing everyday duties for the sake of others saved her.

People who have themselves experienced both grief and fear know how alike those two things are. They know the restlessness and loss of appetite, the inability to concentrate, the inner silent wail that cannot be muffled, the feeling of being in a great lonely wilderness. Grief and fear are equally disabling, distracting, and destructive.

One may cry out in prayer and hear no answer. The heavens are brass. One may search Scripture in vain for some word of release and hope. There

are many such words, but how frequently they seem only to mock us, and a voice whispers: "That's not meant for you. You're taking it out of context!" and no comforting word seems to reach us.

Faith, we know perfectly well, is what we need. We've simply got to exercise faith. But how to do that? How to exercise anything at such a time?

"Pull yourself together!" With what?

"Cheer up!" How?

"Think positively!" But that is a neater trick than we are up to at the moment. We are paralyzed. Fear grips us tightly, grief disables us entirely. We have no heart.

At such a time I have been wonderfully calmed and strengthened by doing some simple duty. Nothing valiant or meritorious or spiritual at all—just something that needed to be done, like a bed to be freshly made or a kitchen floor to be scrubbed, one of those things that will never be noticed if you do it but will most certainly be noticed if you don't! Sometimes it takes everything you have to tackle the job, but it is surprising how strength comes.

Ezekiel was a man who witnessed many strange things and prophesied great cataclysms and splendors. He tells us little about himself, but in the twenty-fourth chapter of his book there is a powerful parenthesis: "The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep nor shall your tears run down. Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your shoes on your feet; do not cover your lips nor eat the bread of mourners.'

So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died. And on the next morning I did as I was commanded” (Ezekiel 24:18).

Ponder those heartrending words: “On the next morning I did as I was commanded”! God asked more of Ezekiel than any human being would dare to ask, but he knew his man. He was asking him to “put on a front,” to act normally, not as a mourner, but to put on turban and shoes and eat his usual food. What extraordinary requirements to make of a man who had just lost the delight of his eyes! But Ezekiel had had plenty of practice in obedience, and it was not his habit to bridle.

It sounds simple. But not easy. It was heroic, certainly. There are other incidents in the Bible where the doing of very ordinary things helped people out of deep trouble. When Paul was sailing as a prisoner to Italy and was about to be wrecked in the Adriatic Sea, everyone on board was terror-stricken. Sailors were trying to escape, the soldiers and centurion and captain were all sure they were doomed, and no one paid attention to Paul’s assurances of faith in God. But when he suggested that they eat, and actually took bread himself and gave thanks for it, “they were all encouraged and ate some food themselves... and when they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea” (Acts 27:36, 38).

Terror had disabled and disoriented them. In their panic they thought only of desperate measures which might have saved a few. But where Paul’s faith had had no effect on them, his common sense—“Let’s eat”—restored them to their senses. Then they were able to see clearly what the next thing was to be done.

Emmi Bonhoeffer writes in *The Auschwitz Trials*, “From the very moment one feels called to act is born the strength to bear whatever horror one will feel or see. In some inexplicable way, terror loses its overwhelming power when it becomes a task that must be faced.”

Thomas Carlyl said, “Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by action.” There is wonderful therapy in taking oneself by the scruff of the

neck, getting up, and doing something. While you are doing, time passes quickly. Time itself will in some measure heal, and “light arises in the darkness”—slowly, it seems, but certainly.

I myself have been hauled out of the Slough of Despond by following the advice of the simple Saxon legend inscribed in an old English parsonage: “Doe the nexte thyng.”

Many a questioning, many a fear,  
Many a doubt hath its quieting here.  
Moment by moment, let down from heaven,  
Time, opportunity, guidance are given.  
Fear not tomorrows, child of the King—  
Trust them with Jesus. Do the next thing!

## *A Silver Star in a Cave*

One does not have to ride a donkey or walk, as Mary and Joseph did, to get to Bethlehem. I took a taxi from Damascus Gate in Jerusalem. But Bethlehem is still a little town—a cluster of stone houses on a hillside surrounded by olive groves and vineyards.

I didn’t want to be shown around by a tourist guide, nor to be told what I was supposed to think about what I saw, not this time. I wanted to go alone into the cave where Jesus is believed to have been born.

I had done some reading and learned that the church had been built during the reign of Constantine over “a certain cave near the village,” according to Justin Martyr. Origen said it was “well known even by those who were not Christians.” Surely a cave that had been used as a

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stable by the local inn would not have been forgotten, if there a baby had been born whom shepherds, bearing an astounding piece of information, had come from the fields to see.

Saint Jerome did not question that this was the very place, but he expressed regret that the mud cradle had been replaced by a silver one and that the whole thing—by the fourth century!—was much too commercialized. Since his day there has been plenty more to see—silver, gold, silks, jewels, candelabra, altar screens—not the sorts of things one associates with a barn.

I went down the staircase into the dim grotto. There the place of Jesus' birth was marked by a silver star inscribed *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est*—"Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary."

Perhaps the unbelieving tourist can shuffle through the sunshine unchanged, hurriedly checking off another tourist attraction—"done." But the visitor who believes the Latin words *Christus natus est* (even if he cannot accept the word *hic*, which means "here") cannot be the same.

In spite of the destruction and bitterness and commercialization and religious disputes and modern war, the overwhelming truth remains: The thing happened! It happened here in Bethlehem. "God became a human being and lived among us. We saw His splendor.... There is a grace in our lives because of His grace" (John 1:14, 16, PHILLIPS).

## *God's Sturdy Faithfulness*

The indwelling Spirit of God is never a source of trouble and scruple but a stabilizing power, a constant. "If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there" (Psalm 139:8)—when I am exultant and when I am depressed. Light and dark to Him are alike. The friendship of God is like that and He asks the same faithfulness from us in return. It takes a brave and loving soul to understand and respond to His sturdy faithfulness, for there is nothing sentimental about it. "I know, O Lord,

that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me" (Psalm 119:75).

The trusting father or teacher does what is needed, not necessarily what is nice. He will even risk losing the child's affection rather than neglect the child's real needs. He will give stern tests when tests are required, withdraw apparent support so that courage and initiative may be learned, assign the distasteful duty, withdraw the dangerous joy—bit by bit producing in the child's soul a fidelity that shall answer to his own.

## *A Great Encouragement*

Many of you know that I was asked to step down at the end of August from my daily radio program, *Gateway to Joy*, which had been broadcast for thirteen years by Back to the Bible. I asked the Lord what He wanted me to do next. No blueprint of the future was offered, but the following poem (alas—I have not been able to locate the author) has wonderfully calmed and fortified me. I will turn seventy-five on December 21. I am simply to trust, taking one day at a time from my Heavenly Father's quieting word: "As thou goest step by step, I will open up the way before thee" (Proverbs 4:12, Hebrew translation).

Child of my love, fear not the unknown morrow,  
Dread not the new demand life makes of thee;  
Thy ignorance doth hold no cause for sorrow  
Since what thou knowest not is known to Me.

Thou canst not see today the hidden meaning  
Of my command, but thou the light shalt gain;  
Walk on in faith, upon My promise leaning,  
And as thou goest all shall be made plain.

One step thou seest—then go forward boldly,  
One step is far enough for faith to see;  
Take that, and thy next duty shall be told thee,  
For step by step thy Lord is leading thee.

Stand not in fear, thy adversaries counting,  
Dare every peril, save to disobey;

Thou shalt march on, all obstacles surmounting,  
For I, the Strong, will open up the way.

Wherefore go gladly to the task assigned thee,  
Having my promise, needing nothing more  
Than just to know, where'er the future find thee,  
In all thy journeyings, I go before.

## *Thoughts From Lars*

I am writing this on September 13, and Elisabeth and I are due to leave for Hungary in a few hours. There is only one problem—no planes are flying. I've never been accused of being a thinking man, but this week, whether I'm a thinking man or not, certainly will stick in my head...the replay of buildings being rammed, then slowly sinking to the ground like a vertical, 100-plus-story pile of dominoes, followed by the pandemonium of vehicles, sirens, bystanders in shock, reporters with answerable questions. Those of us who are alive ten years from now will all remember where we were on 9/11 at about 9:00 a.m.

Some may have found out about the disaster in strange ways, as I did. I had just returned on Monday, September 10, from Norway, where I had had a delightful time with cousin Björg and

her husband Sigurd. It had been a short week of feasting on Björg's cooking—shrimp, fried mackerel, wild salmon, wonderful potatoes, topped off with creamed cakes, puddings, and sauces. Tuesday morning I decided to call a bit after 9:00 a.m., instead of waiting some days to do so. Björg's first words were, "Oh, I'm so glad you're home. You're watching the same as we are on CNN? It's terrible." "No, what you watching?" Thus I found out.

Originally I was to have returned on Tuesday but had decided to return Monday due to our supposed departure today. For me it would have meant a delay in getting back home, but for thousands in New York and Washington, it meant not returning home at all. We often remark, "We do not know what a day will hold." But we do know Who holds the day.

## *Newsletter Will Continue*

Because of the termination of the *Gateway to Joy* broadcast and its accompanying newsletter, *The Gatekeeper*, some of you have wondered if this newsletter was being retired as well. Not yet! Readers of *The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter* may rest assured of its continuation.

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