

# The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter

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## *Christmas on a Bed of Pain*

It is nearly Christmastime. We don't usually think of suffering during this glad season if we can help it. "It's Jesus' birthday!" we tell tiny tots, and we set about making cookies and gifts and trimming the house and the tree.

The very joyfulness of Christmas makes it especially hard for those who suffer. Jesus' birthday, the Feast of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh—the happy morning when the myths about gods coming to earth in the form of men actually came true. This was "glorious news of great joy," not only for poor shepherds but also for all people. Can it be *that* for someone two thousand years later who is nailed to a bed by pain, or who has lost something most precious, or who has been humiliated to the very dust?

Perhaps it can if we think of what that glorious news entailed for the baby Himself. Richard Crashaw (1613-149) described it far more beautifully than I can:

That the Great Angel-blinding Light should  
shrink  
His blaze to shine in a poor Shepherd's eye;  
That the unmeasured God so low should  
sinke,  
As Pris'ner in a few poor rags to lye;  
That from his Mother's Breast he milk should  
drinke,  
Who feeds with Nectar Heaven's faire family,  
That a vile Manger his low Bed should prove  
Who in a Throne of stars thunders above;  
That He whom the Sun serves, should faintly  
peepe  
Through clouds of Infant Flesh! That He,  
the old  
Eternall Word should be a Child, and weepe;  
That He who made the fire, should fear  
the cold,

That Heaven's high Majesty His Court  
should keepe  
In a clay cottage, by each blast control'd;  
That Glories' self should serve our Grieffs and  
feares,  
And free Eternity submit to years,  
Let our overwhelming wonder be.

Crashaw shows us a little of the relinquishment, the limitation, the humiliation that it meant for God to become a baby. "In Jesus we see one who for a short while was made lower than the angels, crowned now with glory and honor because he suffered death" (Hebrews 2:9). "We are God's heirs and Christ's fellow-heirs, if we share his sufferings now in order to share his splendor hereafter" (Romans 8:17). Let us measure our sufferings by the sufferings of the Son of Man. Let us think, then, of the glory and honor He received because He wailed as a newborn in the straw of a stable and was fixed with nails to a cross. Let us think of His glory and honor and remember the incredible promise that that glory will be ours too.

Ours? Yes, ours—we are fellow-heirs, if we share his sufferings. His splendor hereafter is what the sufferings are for. Let us think on these things, and have a very merry Christmas in the midst of whatever sufferings fall to us.

## *A Promotion*

"If every call to Christ and His righteousness is a call to suffering, the converse is equally true—every call to suffering is a call to Christ, a promotion, an invitation to come up higher."

**Charles Brent (1862-1929)**

## Little Mary

We see her first, that little Mary (may I say little? I think she was a teenager), as a simple village girl in a poor home in an out-of-the-way place. She is bending over her work when suddenly the light changes. She raises her eyes. A dazzling stranger stands before her with a puzzling greeting. He calls her “most favored one” and tells her the Lord is with her. She is stunned. I don’t believe her first thoughts are of herself. (“Am I ever lucky!”) No, Mary is troubled. She discerns at once that this has to do with things infinitely larger than herself, far beyond her understanding. What can this mean?

The angel does not weigh in immediately with the stupendous message he has been sent to deliver. He first comforts her. “Don’t be afraid, Mary.” *Mary*. She is not a stranger to him. He is assuring her that he has the right person. He explains what she has been chosen for—to be the mother of the Son of the Most High, a king whose reign will be forever. She has one question now—not about the Most High, not about an eternal king—those are things too high for her—but motherhood is another matter. She understands motherhood, has been looking forward to it with great happiness. Her question is about that: “How can this be? I am still a virgin.”

He does not really explain. He simply states a mystery: “The power of the Most High will overshadow you.” He goes on to tell her of another miraculous pregnancy, that of her old cousin Elisabeth, well past childbearing age. “God’s promises can never fail,” he says. They won’t fail for you, Mary. Rest assured.

How will the girl respond? She is at once totally at the disposal of her Lord; she sees that her visitor is from Him. Whatever the mystery, whatever the divine reasons for being chosen, whatever the inconveniences, even disasters (broken engagement? stoning to death—the punishment for a fornicator?) which she may be required to face, her answer is unequivocal and instant: “Here I am. I am the Lord’s servant; let it be as you have told me.” In other words, *Anything, Lord*.

Next, we see her with Elisabeth, who, by the manner of Mary’s greeting and by her own baby’s sudden movement in her womb, knows immedi-

ately that God has chosen Mary to be the mother of the Lord. They don’t sit down over coffee and natter about the gynecology or the practical logistics or what people are going to say. Mary sings her song of gladness, of thoroughgoing acceptance of the gift, of trust in the Mighty One.

Then we see her sweating in the cold of the stable, putting her own life on the line, as every mother must do, in order to give life to somebody else. We see her with the tough shepherds, breathlessly telling their story of the glory of the Lord and the singing of the angel choir. Everyone else is astonished (a word that comes from “thunderstruck”), but Mary does not join the excited babble. She is quiet, treasuring all these things, pondering them deep in her heart. We see her with the mysterious travelers from the East bringing their lavish gifts. She says nothing as they kneel before the baby she holds in her arms.

We see her in the temple handing over her baby to old Simeon, to whom the Holy Spirit has revealed the child’s amazing destiny: a revelation to the heathen, glory to Israel. But to Mary he gives the far deeper message of suffering, for there is no glory that is not bought by suffering. Her Son will suffer—He will be a sign that men reject. She, His mother, will suffer, will be pierced to the heart. No question or answer from her is recorded. Again we know only her silence.

We see her on the donkey again, on the roundabout journey to Egypt because her husband has been given a secret message in a dream. She does not balk, she does not argue.

We see nothing of her for twelve years—days and nights, weeks and months, years and years of caring for the infant, the toddler, the little boy, the adolescent. There is no mention of any of that. Mary has no witness, no limelight, no special

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recognition of any kind. She is not Mother of the Year. Hers is a life lived in the ordinary necessity of their poverty and their humanity, no one paying attention to her attention to Him. Whatever the level of her comprehension as to the nature of this boy, she knows He was given to her. She remembers how. She treasures all this. She ponders things in the silence of her heart. Did she share any of them with Joseph? Could she? Could he receive them? We know next to nothing of the dynamics between them. She was content to be silent before God.

The apostle Paul tells us we are “hidden with Christ in God.” There is mystery there, but when I think of the life of Mary, I see some facets of that mystery that I missed when I read the apostle. Hers was a hidden life, a faithful one, a holy one—holy in the context of a humble home in a small village where there was not very much diversion. She knew that the ordinary duties were ordained for her as much as the extraordinary way in which they became her assignment. She struck no poses. She was the mother of a baby, willing to be known simply as His mother for the rest of her life. He was an extraordinary baby, the Eternal Word, but his needs were very ordinary, very daily, to His mother. Did she see herself as fully qualified? Surely not. Surely not more than any other woman who finds herself endowed with the awesome gift of a child. It is the most humbling experience of a woman’s life, the most revealing of her own helplessness. Yet we know this mother, Mary, the humble virgin from Nazareth, as “Most Highly Exalted.”

This Christmas, thank God that unto us a Child was born. Thank Him also that there was a pure-hearted young woman prepared to receive that Child with daily dependence, daily obedience, daily trust.

I thank Him for her silence. That spirit is not in me at all, not naturally. I want to learn what she had learned so early: the deep guarding in her heart of each event, mulling over its meaning from God, waiting in silence for His word to her.

I want to learn, too, that extraordinary spirituality does not make one refuse to do ordinary work, that a wish to prove that one is not ordinary is a dead giveaway of spiritual conceit.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

## *Little Things*

“If you would advance in true holiness, you must aim steadily at perfection in little things.”

**Abbé Guillore**

## *Lars’ Highlights of 2002*

One highlight of the year 2002 was a delightful tour of Romania and Hungary. It was the first time that Elisabeth had had the opportunity of speaking in Romania. Our eight days were spent in the Transylvania portion of the country. We were taken with the beautiful countryside of rolling fields and mountain areas. After Communism fell, the large government-run farms were broken up and the land reverted to the people. Now one can see small, very neatly separated sections where a man or a woman, and at times a small group, will be out with their hoes, weeding the rows of corn, onions, peppers, and other crops. It was interesting too to see the horse and plow still in good use.

The people received Elisabeth well. We were amazed at how many knew about Jim Elliot. We wonder if hospitality may have originated in that part of the world. Their houses may not be large, but there is always room for more, and every place we stayed included one or both of the grandparents in the house. There were six of us traveling together. When it was time for dessert, our hosts often set out a plate of small cakes. One time I counted the pieces: sixty for the six of us, neatly arranged on three plates. Those who have little give much.

In Hungary, most of our time was spent relaxing, with only one speaking engagement in Budapest. This was our sixth or seventh time being there. We enjoy the city and have made some good friends there. I remember our first visit, before “the Wall” came down, when we came down the Danube by boat to meet Anne-Marie Kool, who had invited Elisabeth to speak. As we neared Budapest, Elisabeth said, “How will we know this person?” It was a joy to see a young lady on the pier, smiling and holding, for identification, a copy of one of Elisabeth’s books, *Through Gates of Splendor*. Since that time we have enjoyed each other’s company often. This time,

we had a good few days with her again, seeing other parts of Budapest, including two evenings at the symphony. Just so you know—Anne-Marie is Dutch but has been in Hungary for fifteen years and has established a Missions Institute for Hungary, the first of its kind.

Each day of our two-and-a-half-week stay, Elisabeth exclaimed about another perfect day—just the right temperature and no rain. One day, we went to the market (a several-blocks-long indoor market) to get some strawberries. I left Elisabeth sitting on a bench by herself, and when I returned I saw a Hungarian lady talking to her. After she departed, I asked Elisabeth how she knew that lady. She said, “I didn’t. She came up to me to ask whether I was Elisabeth Elliot. She had heard me speak several years ago in Budapest.” Then as we were standing in line to go into the Resistance Museum, a man came along and identified us again. He turned out to be an American who is a missionary there. He had had Elisabeth come and speak to a group at M.I.T. some 18 years ago. He even remembered what she spoke on. We’ve aged, but I guess we are still recognizable.

After our return, we had a few days with Valerie’s family in South Carolina. Val, Walt, and all the grandchildren are doing well. In August, Jim, the “midnumber” in the family of eight, goes off to Clemson University. Walt and Valerie may suffer from an early empty nest syndrome, relatively speaking. But since Sarah, the youngest, is only eight years old, there will yet be a few more

years before the “old folks” will not hear the fall of footsteps and the closing of a door.

We are all thankful for God’s mercies.

## *Prayer of Surrender*

Loving Lord and heavenly Father, I offer up today all that I am, all that I have, all that I do, and all that I suffer, to be Yours today and Yours forever. Give me grace, Lord, to do all that I know of Your holy will. Purify my heart, sanctify my thinking, correct my desires. Teach me, in all of today’s work and trouble and joy, to respond with honest praise, simple trust, and instant obedience, that my life may be in truth a living sacrifice, by the power of Your Holy Spirit and in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, my Master and my all. Amen.

### November 2002 Travel Schedule

**November 9** Denton, Texas, Denton Bible Church, “A Morning With Elisabeth,” 9:00 A.M. to 12:00 noon.

**November 23** Anchorage, Alaska, Mayor’s Prayer Breakfast. For reservations, call (907) 562-1274.

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