

LETTERS FROM GRANDPA

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Dearest grandchild,

On January 8, 1956 five American missionaries died as martyrs in the jungles of Ecuador. They were: Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Nate Saint, and Roger Youderian. Thankfully, these martyrs did not die in vain and their killers became Christians. On January 8, 2006, about 90 from outside Ecuador joined with over 100 local believers to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of this historical event at the very place where the martyrs died. Eight young people received Christ on that occasion and two of the converted killers assisted in their baptism. Then everyone present formed a large circle and took communion. The circle included converts from at least five different tribes that had formerly been bitter enemies.

One of the speakers on that occasion was Bert Elliot. He was the older brother of the martyr Jim Elliot. Bert reminded everyone of two other brothers, James and John. They were both apostles of Jesus. James was the first apostle to die. As a young man he died as a martyr being beheaded by wicked King Herod (Acts 12:1-2). His brother John suffered much for the cause of Christ and was even imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos. He did not, however, die as a martyr. John lived a long life and manifested such love that he became known as the “Apostle of Love”. John described himself as **“the disciple whom Jesus loved” (Jn.. 21:20)**, and wrote more about love than any other of the apostles.

Jim Elliot was like James, and Bert Elliot was like John. Bert went as a missionary to Peru three years before his brother Jim became a missionary to Ecuador. Jim died as a martyr and became famous through books, articles, and movies. Bert, however, labored for over 60 years as a missionary and virtually no one had ever heard of him. That is, until Gilbert Gleason, his nephew by marriage, wrote his biography in 2021. Interestingly, the title of the book is *Love so Amazing*. Bert, like the Apostle John, was famous for his love. Bert died in Peru on Feb. 17, 2012. He was also buried in Peru. Peru was the country which he loved. As both Bert and his wife Colleen were sponsored by a church in Portland, she flew to the states to be part of a memorial in his honor. It was scheduled for March 31, 2012. Sadly, after arriving in Oregon Colleen slipped and fell and hit her head on the pavement. As she was on blood thinner at the time the injury was fatal. When the memorial service began many had not heard of her passing. Typical of their radiant faith, the family explained: “We accept God’s sovereign act as a divine expression of His love for this couple”. It was indeed fitting that they not only spent their lives together in service, but also were honored together at the time of their passing.

Since God did not bless their marriage with children, Bert and Colleen devoted themselves to the family of God. They gave the love of God to the children of God. When both were in their eighties they came to America for a brief furlough but couldn’t wait to get back to their spiritual family in Peru. They worked everywhere in Peru. They worked in the mountains and the valleys, and in the jungles and the cities. With the help of God they established 158 congregations. Their amazing love is a lasting legacy.

The book *Love so Amazing* is basically a condensation of letters and reports received in over 60 years of service. Paul told Timothy to endure hardship like a good soldier (2 Tim. 2:3). This describes the ministry of Bert and Colleen. A soldier in combat doesn’t always know what he will eat, where he will sleep, or even where he will go to the bathroom. He is constantly in unfamiliar territory with unfamiliar people. Sometimes he is in blistering heat and at other times in freezing cold. Sometimes

he is sick and often he is in danger. This is precisely the kind of life the Elliots experienced in Peru. Their poignant letters enable the reader to identify with their “hardships” as well as their victories.

On May 31, 1970 a 7.9 magnitude earthquake jolted central Peru. It was the deadliest natural disaster to strike the American hemispheres in recorded history. It killed some 80,000 outright and destroyed the homes of nearly a million more. Mt. Huascaran is the tallest mountain in Peru. It is 22,205 feet high. When the earthquake hit millions of tons of snow, ice, rocks and mud cascaded down the slopes of that mountain at 150 miles per hour burying entire villages. Like true soldiers of Christ the Elliots were there in the trenches to help pick up the pieces.

Our English word “travel” comes from the word “travail”. Travel brought travail in Elizabethan England. It did the same in Peru. A typical trip to a mountain village involved four hours of walking, finding a place to stay, something to eat, and then going door to door witnessing for Christ and leaving Scripture booklets. Colleen wrote about: *“heat, dust, desert, desolation, goats, burros, matchstick-like houses, impossible roads, but people and more people at every turn of the road”*. Winning people to Christ, of course, was more important to them than their personal comfort.

They usually worked as a team but when Bert was away Colleen learned to set the rat traps and butcher chickens by herself. Their travels were often by boat into the mosquito infected jungle to reach indigenous people groups. It was discouraging to them that the natives were more interested in their “medicine” than in their “message”, but their medical ministry was an important first step in leading them to Christ. In addition to pulling teeth and treating routine illnesses, sometimes serious injuries were unavoidable. On one occasion they ministered to a 17 year old boy who had been shot in the hand. The bullet had crossed the back of his hand taking out hunks of bone and his index finger. His ring finger was also blown away and his middle finger was dangling from a piece of skin. This is just one of the many medical challenges they faced on a daily basis.

On another occasion they travelled two and a half days into the jungle to witness in a Stone Age Chayahuita village. No one in the tribe could speak Spanish. They still wore their own tribal clothing and painted their faces with elaborate designs as their ancestors had done for generations. The children didn’t wear anything at all. As he often did, Bert adapted to the inconvenience and was able to tell them about the love of God through an interpreter.

A near death experience came on Sept. 11, 1969. Bert and a Christian brother named Keith, were riding a motorcycle into the mountains. Suddenly a truck veered into their lane without warning. The dual wheels rolled over Keith’s chest and stomach and came to rest on Bert’s hips. Bert screamed for the driver to pull forward. Fortunately the truck was empty but the fact that both Bert and Keith survived their injuries borders on the miraculous. They were taken by a taxi to a local hospital, and then flown to a hospital in Lima the next day. As always, they suffered such hardships like “good soldiers” realizing that their “light afflictions” were only for a moment (2 Cor. 4:17).

Our family friend, the late Mike Pratt, wisely advised: “Be careful who your heroes are”. This is good counsel. Sadly, the real heroes like Bert and Colleen are not honored on the evening news or lauded for their achievements in our public schools. I pray, however that their selfless service will inspire you to follow their example and do your part to help make the world a better place in which to live. Only eternity will reveal the complete legacy of love demonstrated by godly men and women like Bert and Colleen Elliot. We too can find somebody to love and leave behind our own legacy.

I love you,
Grandpa Boyce