

MISSIONARY FROM THE START

The young mother clapped a lid on a box and scanned the small apartment hurriedly.

“I think this is the last of it,” she told herself. “What have I forgotten?” The three rooms stared back at her, the massive antique furniture holding a wealth of memories.

She and her missionary husband had been happy in the five years they had lived in Brussels—first for a few years in an old, run-down building, fifty-eight steps above a wine shop, and with no running water; next, for a few months in a three room apartment heated by coal, the bathtub in the kitchen. They had learned French and explained the gospel to children in the slums of Brussels. They had taught Bible classes. After they had been there for over a year, Katherine had learned she was to have a baby; young Phil joined them on the mission field. He was now packed up for travel and was with his father, also named Phil, waiting for her at the dock.

Phil’s care had taken up much of her time, and, as a result, she felt she was a poor specimen of a missionary. She had been asked to teach a group of women but was not sure she had been up to it. She wrote her parents back home, “I tried to wriggle out of it but

Philippians 4:13 kept recurring to me, *'I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me'*(KJV), until I finally had to say I'd try to do it. I've since wondered what the ladies got out of my feeble efforts, but I know the experience was good for me."¹

Then baby Elisabeth had come along as well.

Now Katherine remembered she must rush to meet her husband. She snatched up the box and headed for the door. The motorcar hummed impatiently as she jumped inside.

"What have I forgotten? Anything?" she called back to the maid. "I'm headed to the docks."

"Wait, madam, you have forgotten something!" The maid ran to the car with a bundle in her arms. "The baby, madam! Think about the baby!"

Katherine nodded. "Yes, yes, of course." She met the maid and gathered her tiny daughter into her arms. Elisabeth was five months old. Her mother bundled her snugly for protection from the brisk Belgian wind and in minutes joined her husband at the docks. There, they would ferry to England and then take a steamer home. The voyage would take about a week to reach the shores of the United States.

As they boarded the ship, an event was unfolding three thousand miles away that would change their world forever. A young man took off in a specially designed aircraft from the coast of Long Island, New York. The plane was heavy with fuel and barely made it over the telephone wires at the end of the runway. Five hundred people watched as young Charles Lindbergh headed out toward the Atlantic Ocean, his silver "Spirit of St. Louis" gleaming in the morning sky. No one had ever crossed the

1. Elisabeth Elliot, *The Shaping of a Christian Family* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), p. 48.

Atlantic in an airplane before. Others had tried and died in the attempt. It was his try now. He had slimmed his equipment down to carry as little extra weight as possible. He packed four sandwiches, one canteen, and put a wicker chair in the cockpit.

The trip would take thirty-six hours. Charles fought sleep all along the way. He encountered dense fog and attempted to fly above it, then under it. During the times he tried to figure out where he was, he would drop down to twenty feet above the leaping waves to get his bearings. Once, his plane started icing up, and he was sure he would be lost at sea.

“That worried me a great deal,” Lindbergh later wrote, “and I debated whether I should keep on or go back. I decided I must not think any more about going back.”²

On the second day, he thought he was close to the coast of England when he saw fishing boats and swooped down close to ask directions. But he couldn’t make out what they said in response.

Finally he spotted the coastline of France. From there, he followed the Seine River to Paris. The Eiffel Tower loomed into view; he saw a cheering crowd waiting. As he spiraled down, descending to land, one hundred thousand people broke through police barricades and swarmed the runway. There were so many right beneath his plane, he was afraid the propeller might hit them.

Speeches, awards, and honor awaited Charles Lindbergh. He had opened up a new era of travel. Suddenly, the world would feel like a much smaller place because airplanes could get people wherever they wanted to go, and quickly. They could shorten the distances from country to country,

2. “*The Flight*” Charles Lindbergh An American Aviator,
<http://www.charleslinbergh.com/history/paris.asp>

continent to continent, and reach out-of-the-way places that were inaccessible by car, boat, or foot. The breakthrough would prove a vital help to the cause of missions. With the ability to travel by airplane, missionaries could reach people groups who had never heard the gospel or even had any contact with the modern world. Jets, rocket ships, and space shuttles were yet to be developed, but the little aircraft Lindbergh flew in 1927 was much like the ones missionaries would use for decades.

Katherine and Phil and their little ones disembarked onto American shores to the news of Lindbergh's success. Could they have known then how his flight would affect their lives? Could this missionary couple have suspected that their little Elisabeth would one day join a team of hardy young pioneer missionaries who would take the gospel to peoples so primitive that no white man had ever associated with them and lived to tell about it? Could they have known that their baby daughter would one day use the same sort of plane to reach a fierce, remote people, forging a story that would be heard around the world, and raising up a new generation of missionaries that were eager to lay down their lives for the kingdom of God?

AN EYE FOR DETAIL

“Come, Betts, listen with me.” Her father called Elisabeth by her pet name, taking her hand and gently drawing her to sit on a cool, grey rock in the woods where they walked.

“Shush,” he said, “do you hear that bird calling?”

“Yes, Daddy, I think it’s a wood thrush,” Elisabeth replied. “It sounds like a beautiful bell.”

“Very good,” her father gazed down on her proudly. “The wood thrush is chubby and polka-dotted over his belly,” he said. “You can see him perched in that Chinese chestnut tree over there.”

“Where?” she looked through the array of green colors down the hill.

“There, the chestnut tree has leaves like fingers.”

She nodded in excitement. “Yes, there he is.”

Then her father lowered his voice and sang out a bird call of his own.

“It’s the crested flycatcher!” she said excitedly.

“Right again!” he said. Across the trees, they heard melodic tones resembling a piccolo.

“That’s the song sparrow, little Betts,” said her father. He mimicked the call perfectly. “See, you hold your mouth like this.”

Elisabeth laughed. It was so much fun to go on a walk with her father. He knew all the birds and trees and loved to teach them to his children.

In the time since they had moved back to the States, their father had become a writer and editor for the *Sunday School Times*, an aid that went out from Philadelphia to Sunday School teachers in churches of all kinds throughout the country. His eye for detail made for descriptive and colorful writing, and he was well-respected in the ministry.

When Elisabeth's father would return home from work every day, Katherine, her mother, would gather the children for supper and family devotions. By now, the Howard family had grown. It was 1934. Phil was now ten, Elisabeth was seven, and Dave was six.

At the supper table that night, her father opened as he always did. "Our Father, we thank Thee for this good food, and with this we ask Thy blessing, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, amen."

Parents and children engaged in lively but orderly conversation around the dining table, not interrupting each other, but taking turns. Frequent laughter peppered their amiable chit chat.

Mr Howard asked his daughter how school was going.

"It's fine, Daddy. Sometimes arithmetic is hard for me to figure out." Elisabeth squirmed a little in her seat. She didn't really enjoy math. She liked words like her daddy did. Suddenly she had an idea that would divert the focus away from math.

"Like Miss Maclean says, "Oyful! It's poifectly oyful when a poyson can't do theah homewoyk." Elisabeth's nasal tones perfectly reflected her Sunday School teacher's thick New Jersey accent, showing the skill of mimicry she had

picked up from her father (with birds) and then put her own spin on (with people).

“Now, Betty, she’s a devoted soul,”¹ her mother cautioned, gently curbing the fun Elisabeth was making at someone else’s expense.

“Let’s get to family prayers now, children.” Her father directed his oldest son to the hymnals, while he pulled the little volume of *Daily Light* off the buffet table. Mr Howard turned to the evening portion for that date and read the short selection of Scripture. The three children listened quietly and attentively. When he had concluded, Mr Howard asked a few questions to see how well his children had been listening and how well they understood.

“Now, everyone, what are your prayer requests?” he asked.

“Could you pray I could finish my schoolwork in time to get to play baseball in the evenings?” Phil asked. Mr Howard wrote it down.

“How about you, Dearie?”

Their mother spoke mildly. “Please pray for my strength in caring for the children.”

Elisabeth thought hard. She remembered what she thought was a baby hospital down the street from their house. Sometimes she heard crying coming through the windows.

“I’d like to ask prayer for a baby sister,” she piped up. “We could get one from that baby home down the street.”

Her parents looked at each other. “Well, that’s not how we got the rest of you,” her mother explained. “God can make a baby grow inside the mother.”²

1. *Elisabeth Elliot Memorial Service at Wheaton College*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSi3mR9GQIE>

2. Elisabeth Elliot, *The Shaping of a Christian Family* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), p. 81.

"Then, that's what I want to ask for," said Elisabeth. "I want the Lord to grow me a sister."

Their eyes all closed in prayer and her father's rich tones met her ears. "Bless dear Mother, give her strength for her work; bless Phil in his schoolwork, help Betty with hers—especially her arithmetic.³ Help Davey be an obedient boy. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray." Then the family joined him, heads bowed still, in reciting the Lord's prayer.

Now came the singing. Young Phil asked for "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us." Together, the family sang through every verse. The next night, another child would get a turn to choose a hymn for the family to sing, again, through all the verses. By this practise, the children quickly learned many hymns by memory. And the task was completely painless. They loved to sing together.

A few weeks later, Elisabeth woke up to the smell of bacon frying. Aunt Alice, the family's household helper, called upstairs for the children to come down for breakfast. The winter chill in Elisabeth's bedroom made her reluctant to leave her bed.

"Come down, Phil, Betty, Davey! Come and eat. Your mother and daddy are away for the morning."

The children came downstairs shivering. They tried to busy themselves as they waited for their parents to return. Davey, the most mischievous of the three, began fiddling with a stick. The stick had been wedged in tightly to keep the window panes shut in their proper position, and he wanted the window open. As he forced it open, the upper frame descended with a crash. Glass shattered everywhere. Elisabeth and Phil groaned as the biting winter wind roared into the room. Aunt Alice had to call

3. Ibid., p. 59.

for a repairman, but it would be several hours before he could come. The children picked up the braided rug and huddled under it, cold and miserable for the rest of the day, wishing their parents would come back.

After a while, the telephone rang, and Aunt Alice went to answer it.

"It's for you, children!" she called out. They ran to the phone in the hallway.

"Phil, Betts, Dave," said their dad breathlessly, "Your mother is fine. We have a new baby in the family. Betts, God has answered your prayer. He has given you a baby sister. Her name is Virginia Anne. We'll call her Ginny."

"Thank you, Lord," Elisabeth prayed that night. The Lord is real, she thought. He can be trusted. He is with my family and He cares for me too. He notices even the details of my life, just like my father. Thus, Elisabeth's early impressions of the Lord were formed by a peaceful home and loving parents.