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A Love Story: Lars and Elisabeth Elliot Gren, Part 2

Guests: Lars and Elisabeth Gren
From the series: A Love Story: Lars and Elisabeth Elliot Gren (Day 2 of 2)
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Bob: And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us on the Thursday edition. We've got a little early Christmas gift for our listeners. We are going to hear Part Two of a conversation that you and I had, more than a decade-and-a-half ago. This was in 1999, when we sat down with Elisabeth Elliot Gren and her husband, Lars Gren. They were gathered together with us, along with the speakers who speak at our *Weekend to Remember*® marriage getaways. We had a chance to just ask them to share their love story.

We had *no idea* when we sat down with them that evening—

Dennis: No; no! It was just going to be Elisabeth Elliot and her husband. It turned out to be one of the most entertaining evenings I have ever spent with any group of people—it was absolutely *delightful*. Elisabeth Elliot is not just a very somber writer and speaker / articulate—but she has a great sense of humor. I think a lot of that came about, Bob, as a result of her marriage to Lars Gren, which was for more than 35 years—just a great lady and he's a great man. It's fun to hear two people, who like each other, but who are very different.

Bob: We got the news this year that Elisabeth had gone home to heaven / that she had passed away. I'm looking forward to getting a chance to sit down with her again in eternity and revisit some of this. We thought, as 2015 draws to a close as we head toward Christmas, this would be a story that's worth revisiting.

When we left off, we had just asked Lars about how he popped the question when he proposed to Elisabeth. There was a little bit of disagreement between the two of them—I think their memories of that event were a little different.

Dennis: It was a magical moment because Elisabeth Elliot Gren kind of had some memories that Lars indicated he didn't know much about.

[Previously Recorded Interview]

Elisabeth: I was just going to tell some of the things that had happened in my mind, *months* before you actually—

Bob: Yes, please do.

Dennis: Yes.

Lars: I'd like to know too. [Laughter]

Elisabeth: He already knows. No, as I said, my mind was *absolutely* closed to the possibility of a third marriage. As much as I liked Lars—thought he was a delightful man and that somebody who would get Lars would be a very fortunate person—but I was not at all in the market for anything like that.

But, through a very remarkable series of circumstances, I found myself with Ruth Graham one time. I just thought: "Now, here's a person who—she is a wise, wonderful, godly woman. I can tell her a little bit about this person, without naming him or anything, just to see..."—just sort of run by what she might think. I described this man and waited to see what she would say about the possibility of an old woman like me getting married, at such an age, after having two husbands. She just said, "Elisabeth, it just wouldn't surprise me in the least if God would give you exactly that sort of a man."

Very shortly, thereafter, I was convicted by the fact that God was saying to me: "You have not asked Me *one thing* about this. You just made up your mind that you were going to stay single the rest of your life." Well, then, I had to get down on my knees, and *repent*, and say, "Well, you know, Lord, I want to do what You want me to do," and "How could I possibly have failed to, at least, mention this in prayer?" I then opened my Bible. To my utter astonishment—

Well, I have to say, before I tell you that, that I was constantly comparing Jim Elliot to Addison Leach. Jim could do a lot of things Ad couldn't do; Ad could do things Jim couldn't do. Lars could do a lot of things that Ad and Jim couldn't do. I was making these odious comparisons.

I opened my Bible and, lo and behold, it was staring me in the face: "Men have different gifts, but it is the same Lord who accomplishes His purposes through them all." It was through Scripture, it was through prayer, and it was through the wisdom of an older person / and I had several other older people, too, that said the same thing.

Dennis: And so, as he gave you the ring, and said he'd like you to be his wife—

Lars: She didn't say, "Yes," or "No."

Dennis: What did you do? First of all, what were you thinking as he brought the ring out?

Elisabeth: Well, the ring happened. It was a wedding ring—it was not an engagement ring. He brought out this little square box and my heart just sank—I thought: "Oh, my

goodness. What man would ever give a ring until he's, at least, proposed?" [Laughter] And he brought out this wedding ring and told me, right up front—he said, "I just"—he said, "This is my Swedish grandmother's wedding ring." Lars is from Norway—well, he's half Swedish and half Norwegian—but he grew up in Norway. And so he said, "I just want you to know I'm not playing games." That was another very strong impetus for me to think of him in the possibility of getting married.

Anyway, when he proposed, I just said, "Well, of course I can't possibly give you an answer now; but I will think about it and pray about it." And he was shocked that I did give him an answer as soon as I did. What was it? How many weeks?

Lars: Well, it was in June. Then I kind of thought it might be September—August or September—because I was painting you a kitchen. [Laughter] But you sent a letter about two weeks later; didn't you?

Elisabeth: I think it was something like that.

Lars: I think it was about two weeks.

Elisabeth: Yes, anyway.

Lars: And so, I got it by mail—I didn't get an answer in person / I got it by mail. [Laughter]

Bob: She sent a letter?

Lars: Yes.

Bob: And what did it say?

Lars: I don't remember. I think she said—[Laughter]

Elisabeth: "Yes."

Bob: "Yes"?

Elisabeth: I'm a woman of few words. [Laughter]

Dennis: Okay, now. Why did you write him a letter and not ask to speak with him personally? Why did you do it that way?

Lars: A lady doesn't call a man on the telephone—she would wait for me to call.

Elisabeth: I was living in a little cottage on Cape Cod.

Lars: She was on vacation.

Elisabeth: He was painting my kitchen, back in Hamilton.

Lars: Doing a good job. [Laughter]

Bob: So you got the letter, Lars.

Lars: Yes.

Bob: And?

Lars: And—well, I don't—well, I was very happy about it. We didn't announce it—you know, we just kept it—I think we waited until Thanksgiving.

Elisabeth: We didn't tell—we didn't tell anybody but just a few—

Lars: We didn't tell anybody. We didn't tell anybody because—

Elisabeth: —family members before we got married in December.

Lars: We got married in December—so we told everybody at Thanksgiving. Some said, I think, that when the news came out, “Why, the seminary roof blew off.” [Laughter]

Elisabeth: —because I'd been married to a professor at the seminary; and now, I was marrying a *student* from the seminary. [Laughter]

Lars: “Now, what did you do?” But I also got a lot from Dr. Leach—Addison Leach, the second husband—I got his bath robe. [Laughter]

Elisabeth: You still have it—it's in your suitcase. [Laughter]

Lars: I'm wearing his watch. [Laughter] You know, with Elisabeth having been a missionary—you learn how to cut corners, as a missionary, and make do—and be a little bit on the frugal side. So when I got / when we got married, and I got the wedding ring, it did look a little familiar—[Laughter]—and it's a nice one. See, it's—you can't see it back there, but it's kind of square on top.

Dennis: Right.

Lars: And it's got ELG in there, but it's kind of not very deep letters. [Laughter] And the reason it's not deep—she had to grind off about a quarter of it. [Laughter] The initials before was AHL / Addison Hardee Leach—[Laughter]—her second husband. And I told her—I said: “I wish I'd known you were going to do that because I would have left his

initials on. It would have been a great conversation piece.” [Laughter] And she didn’t have to cut it either—we were the same size—[Laughter]—same ring finger. Yes!

Dennis: I’ve been in a lot of interviews. [Laughter] But, if you would, just sit with me for a few moments and think about it: “How would you like to turn the corner from this conversation to some theologically-penetrating questions?” [Laughter] I’m not sure we need to, personally.

We have something—another little personal touch, at this point, that we would like to add. You know, Elisabeth, there are a lot of people who probably wonder, “What’s it like to be your daughter?” We’ve heard a little bit about what it’s like to court you, and be a good friend, and finally a soul mate and a husband; but we decided we would place a phone call to your daughter Valerie and ask her what it was like to be Elisabeth Elliot’s daughter.

Elisabeth: Yes, that’s a good question.

Dennis: We want you to listen in as we play a little tape of a phone call we had recently with Valerie, and then we want you to comment on this too.

[Recorded Phone Conversation]

Bob: As you look back, growing up as Elisabeth Elliot’s daughter, are there more pluses than minuses?

Valerie: Oh, definitely.

Bob: Like: “What do you think—when you think about it—what has been the most influential part of your mom’s life on you?”

Valerie: She spoke the truth to me *always*—always spoke the truth. That was wonderful—so I could count on her word / I was confident that she was telling me the truth. If she had to punish me, or if she had to tell me that something good was going to happen, I could count on it happening. She didn’t ever make empty threats or empty promises.

Bob: Was she strict?

Valerie: She was just strict enough that—I never thought of her as too strict.

Bob: You didn’t?

Valerie: No.

Bob: When you were a teenager, you didn't think: "I want it a different way. I wish I had a different mom"?

Valerie: Not at all / no. The only—only little thing I remember us having a slight disagreement about was the length of my skirts—and this was in 1971 and '72.

Bob: And what did you think was appropriate?

Valerie: [Laughter] Unfortunately, I wanted a little shorter skirt than she thought was appropriate. [Laughter]

Bob: Now how old were you at the time?

Valerie: This was when I was about 16 and 17.

Bob: And a little shorter—like above the knee?

Valerie: [Laughter] I'm not going to be too specific.

Bob: And where did you guys come to a meeting of the minds on this? I mean, where did the skirts end up?

Valerie: Well, she probably allowed me to wear almost the style, maybe not quite as short as some girls wore. But I would say—I'm doing it a little differently with my girls.

Bob: When—do I have this right? Your husband—you met him because he was living with your mother?

Valerie: Well, he was a boarder / he was a seminary student. My mother's husband had just died, and I was gone off to college. So my mother decided she needed someone else living in the house. Walt Shepard was the young man who moved in. So she got to know him before I got to know him, and she was quite impressed with him. I got to know him when I got home, and I was impressed with him too.

Bob: Had she been impressed with the other boys who had shown attention?

Valerie: No—you mean the ones who had shown me attention?

Bob: Yes.

Valerie: No.

Bob: Had you been impressed with any of those young men?

Valerie: Well, a couple—slightly; yes.

Bob: Right. Was that ever a source of conflict for you—

Valerie: No, not at all.

Bob: —when Mom said, “I don’t think much of him,”?

Valerie: There wasn’t a serious enough relationship with any one of them that I was quite upset. You know, I wanted her approval. I was thankful that, when I got to know Walt, she was completely for him and gave us her blessing.

Bob: Yes.

Valerie: Really, I had very happy teen years.

Bob: When you think of the legacy that she has left to you, what’s at the center of that?

Valerie: Besides speaking the truth to me, she always gave me the confidence and the encouragement that I was loved. She always gave me the confidence that my father had lived solely for God’s glory. I was always assured and comforted that someday I would meet my father in heaven.

Bob: Yes.

Valerie: And I think the greatest legacy was simply—well, there are so many things that are involved in it—but her love and her absolute clear teaching of the truth to me.

Bob: Yes; yes. You’ve got a chance to address her in front of the group—anything you’d want to say to them?

Valerie: Well, my mother is a wonderful mother. She has been a *great* influence on my life, and I am so thankful for her. She’s been such a blessing to me, and she still is a blessing to me. Every time that I talk to her / every time that I write to her or hear from her, she wants to encourage me; and she wants to give me hope in the Lord. She always points me to the Lord. I’m glad that you all get to hear her. And I’m, again, just so thankful that the Lord has given me such a gift in a mother.

Bob: Valerie—thanks for taking a few minutes to be with us.

Valerie: You’re welcome.

Bob: Appreciate it.

Valerie: Bye-bye. God bless. [Applause]

Dennis: Elisabeth, what was going through your mind as you listened to Valerie share?

Elisabeth: “To God be the glory.” I was talking with a friend of mine when Val was about ten years old. This friend had several children, and she was very upset about the kind of relationship that she had with some of her children. She wanted to know how I would describe my relationship with Valerie. I just said, “She’s really never given me five minutes of worry,”—she’s just a lovely woman. I consider myself tremendously blessed in such a daughter, and such a son-in-law, and such beloved grandchildren—the oldest is 21 / the youngest is 5.

Bob: How short did she want the skirts to be?

Elisabeth: Oh, like 12 inches from the waist.

Dennis: Oh, no!

Elisabeth: Well, just exactly the way they are now again. I mean, it’s come full circle, really. It’s just outrageous! [Laughter]

Bob: And where did you settle?

Elisabeth: Well, much too short. I mean, I look at some of the pictures—and I’m sure we must have argued over a few inches—but I should never have let her have them as short as I did. [Laughter] It’s just appalling!

Bob: You caved? Elisabeth Elliot caved in?

Elisabeth: Yes, I’m afraid I did. When I look—I didn’t know it till I look at those pictures now—and I think, “How could I *possibly* have permitted that child to go out the *door* looking like that?!”

Lars: I noticed, too, that yours wasn’t too long there for a while. [Laughter]

Bob: Good luck here, Dennis.

Dennis: I’m going to rescue you from this one. [Laughter] We were talking, out on the veranda a little earlier, just on your personal opinions on families and size of families—some of your opinions about that for Christian families.

Elisabeth: Yes, well, I have the opportunity of doing a lot of traveling around and speaking. Every time I have a chance to speak to young couples, I try to say to them, “You will be doing your children a very big favor if you have a *big* family!” because, number one, of course, the Bible says you’re supposed to be fruitful and multiply. Of course, it’s almost un-American to have more than two children. But if you only have

two children, you're not multiplying. One man and one woman are not multiplying if all you produce is two children.

But the great thing that I see—and, of course, having had only one child myself, I didn't think about these things nearly as much as I do now, although I came from a family of six. The dynamics just fascinate me—I watch my grandchildren together. I see that the great blessing of a big family / one of the *many* great blessings is that it's *impossible* for children to grow up totally selfish in a big family. You just *have* to learn to give and take. I see that in action in Valerie and Walt's family; and, of course, in many other families, I have that opportunity. So, that's just a little prod that I like to give to young couples: "You just keep on having children!" I'm thrilled to see some of these pictures of big families—it's just *wonderful*. Don't pay any attention to what the world is telling you on that score. [Applause]

Let me tell you another thing that somebody may correct me about—I may not be exactly right on this—but I heard, not too many months ago, that at the rate homeschoolers are multiplying—and, of course, very often homeschoolers have big families—within two or three more generations / I've forgotten what they said—it would be the majority of the United States. This, to me, is a very heartening thing—to think that, if we could propagate enough Christian families, we would actually take over the majority.

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: Bob remembers this moment from when we interviewed you—this will be my last question. In the interview—and you're going to talk to the ladies more about this later on—but I want the guys to hear your answer because I thought this was particularly profound. When Bob and I were interviewing you, one of us asked you the question, "Elisabeth, in your marriage, do you ever struggle with being submissive?" Now, I don't know if you know how you answered it at that time.

Elisabeth: Tell me.

Dennis: Your answer was—Bob.

Bob: She said, "I resist submission with every fiber of my being—[Laughter]"

Elisabeth: "—but I do it."

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: That's exactly right.

Bob: You did acknowledge that you do, but it's a struggle for you—a perpetual struggle?

Elisabeth: Well, I really don't like the word, "struggle,"—so I'm sorry to hear that I used that word because—

Dennis: I don't think you used the word, "struggle."

Elisabeth: In my opinion, the word, "struggle,"—99 times out of 100 means "delayed obedience." You know, as long as we can give ourselves permission to struggle, we don't have to obey God. So that's a very bad thing if that's what I said because—what I mean to say is that I don't do it because I *like* to do it / I do it because the Scripture clearly tells me. There's never been any question in my mind that wives are to submit to their husbands. It has absolutely nothing to do with how I *feel* about it—I know what God says. And I saw it in my parents—our parents were the ones that set the example for us.

[Studio]

Bob: It's such a delight to hear Elisabeth Elliot Gren and her husband, Lars Gren, and just to remember that God gave them a rich marriage for three-and-a-half-plus decades.

Dennis: And the reason they had a rich marriage was because of what happened on the day following Christmas Eve. We're on Christmas Eve here, talking about the coming of the King of kings and Lord of lords—Emmanuel / God with us—who came to invade human hearts, and change our hearts, and call us away from selfishness and toward having peace with one another. I was just thinking about this, here on Christmas Eve, Bob—Luke, Chapter 2, verse 14—the heavenly host was praising God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased."

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: And I just think there's a need in our world today for peace and the Prince of Peace. The King of kings and the Lord of lords is the One who came to deliver the peace of God between God and man. Jesus Christ will change your life if you'll give Him a chance. If you'll trust in Him and allow Him to invade your soul, He can bring that peace into your life, your marriage, your family. I just have to say—I always look forward to Christmas morning. It is a *delight* to just think about when the Prince of Peace came and how He has changed my life, our marriage, our family, and how we get the privilege of helping other families in the process.

Bob: And it's humbling to know that we have listeners / we have folks, who have attended a *Weekend to Remember* marriage getaway in 2015—there are people, who have been touched by this ministry. This year, Christmas is a different holiday for them than it's ever been before as a result of how God has used *FamilyLife Today*. So,

“Thanks,” to you for helping make that happen as you support the ministry of *FamilyLife Today*.

We do hope you get some time with your family during the holidays, and hope you can join us back tomorrow when we’re going to spend time reflecting on some of the names given to Jesus 700 years before He was born. Isaiah told us He would be the “Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace.” We’ll spend some time reflecting on those titles for Jesus tomorrow. I hope you can tune in and join us for part of your Christmas Day.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back tomorrow for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*

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