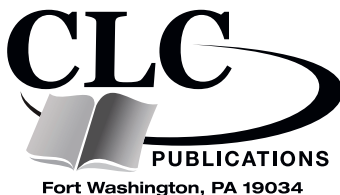


# THE UNWANTED GIFT

*Hearing God in the Midst of Your Struggles*

Tom Elliff



*The Unwanted Gift*

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# Dedicated to

Jeannie Elliff

God's perfect gift as a  
wife,  
mother,  
grandmother,  
and great-grandmother,

and whose one desire was to reflect that she was  
a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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## Foreword

This is a book we prayed we would never have to read; yet, at the same time, it is one that every believer needs to read. *The Unwanted Gift* is a revelation from the lives of a godly couple facing adversity, crisis and suffering. We have been privileged to know the Elliffs as friends, mentors, prayer partners and heroes in the faith. As we watched them face the struggles mentioned in this book, one thing was consistent and clear: Tom and Jeannie demonstrated at every turn what it means to take God at His Word. They did not ask for this gift, but they have gifted us with the wisdom they gleaned from receiving it and trusting God in the midst of it.

Their walk of faith has not been an easy one, but this couple never lost their joy or their hope. Tom has spoken at Sherwood nearly a hundred times through the years, and they are like family to this body of believers. As a church, we prayed, listened and learned from their journey. When they were here, Jeannie would sing in the choir; and Tom would always preach on faith, prayer and the victorious Christian life. Tom has been

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the anchor for our ReFRESH Conference team; and Jeannie was always there to encourage, pray and love on people.

Tom and Jeannie have been used by God to remind our church, our family, and countless numbers of believers to live out what you claim to believe. We visited with them on Jeannie's last day in her earthly body. When Terri and I walked into their bedroom, the presence of the Holy Spirit was so thick you could almost breathe it in. To sit with this godly couple in those moments was one of the greatest privileges we've ever had.

We believe this is the best book written on suffering and grief since Vance Havner's *Though I Walk through the Valley*. This book will help you and those you love who may be in a valley and questioning God's plan and purpose in the pain. In the days and years to come, God is going to use this book to influence and impact tens of thousands of lives. People will love Jesus more and will understand His grace and goodness in a fresh way after reading *The Unwanted Gift*. No one wants this journey—but if we are the recipient of an unwanted gift, we should pray that we will walk in the same grace and Christlikeness in which Tom and Jeannie walked.

—Michael and Terri Catt  
Sherwood Baptist Church, Albany, Georgia

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## OUR STORY

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Just as we had done so many times before in our forty-eight years and eleven months of marriage, Jeannie and I were lying together side by side, holding hands, alone in our darkened bedroom. Jeannie's labored breathing had now become settled and quiet. I began quoting Scripture, a practice that we'd especially leaned upon during these past few months when full hearts and restless thoughts made falling asleep difficult for us both. But this time, I was speaking the words alone—first from a familiar psalm, then from Ephesians, and finally the comforting words of Christ spoken just hours before His own death.

“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1–2).

At those last words the presence of the Divine Bridegroom filled the room. Leaning near, He whispered, “It's time! Now, come away my love!”

Jeannie took one slow, final breath of earth's stale air, released my hand, and raced into the arms of her Savior. Marveling at the Light and fresh Presence now filling her heart, she entered this, her new home!

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Moments later, I stood alone beside our bed, now occupied only by Jeannie's beautiful but vacated earthly temple, and said a tearful farewell to the love of my life, rejoicing that she was now in the arms of the One who loved her most.

This is our story—Jeannie's and mine. But this is also the story of a gift—a gift no one, not even you, really wants. By the end of the story, we pray you'll discover the reality that, hidden within this unwanted gift, are the very treasures you have always longed to possess.

But first I need to tell you about two gifts we both wanted . . . passionately!



# 1

## **The *Wanted* Gifts**

*It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him  
a helper suitable for him.*

Genesis 2:18

PEOPLE LAUGH WHEN I TELL THEM that my first conscious thought of marriage and its benefits occurred at some point early in my third year of grade school. Life was simple, our family was stable and our home was a happy place. “I want to be married,” I said to myself as I observed my dad and mom, and other couples, who seemed to cherish one another and the special relationship they shared in marriage.

That sentiment only grew stronger over the years. Somewhere, early in my college years, I heard that it was wise for a man to have a biblical template of the kind of person he should seek as his wife. My template was

in Ephesians, especially chapter five, and I'd often hold that up as a model for both me and my future wife. I *wanted* the Lord to occupy the center place in my marriage, and I *wanted* my bride to *want* that as well.

One bright fall day in my senior year of college, while I was standing on the steps of the university chapel, *she* appeared . . . the one girl who matched the beautiful picture God had painted on the walls of my heart. I can distinctly remember what she was wearing—a madras blouse, blue-jeaned skirt, bobby socks, and penny loafers with bright pennies in them. Her hair was tied up in two blond ponytails, and she was wearing a perfume that I later called “Get Your Man!” (I discovered that it was actually called Ambush!)

When I saw Jeannie, I promptly forgot all those warnings about love at first sight! We had actually met formally on a previous occasion. She was a friend of my brother, was two years younger than me, and was a member of the church I attended for a few months during my last year of high school—but on that beautiful fall day I really *saw* Jeannie for the first time.

With an abundant measure of optimism, I stopped Jeannie as she approached the chapel steps and asked if I could take her out to dinner—that very night! I was just certain she'd agree! Instead, Jeannie just smiled (a

smile that forever captured my heart) and told me she was flattered by the invitation but had an obligation at her church that evening with a young girls' mission organization.

"I'll just plan to be there as well," I blurted out impulsively, "and when church is over we can grab a bite to eat at the Town House Restaurant." To my absolute delight, she accepted!

So there I sat, a few rows back in the church auditorium, guarding Jeannie's purse (something I discovered would later become a lifetime assignment). I waited patiently, trying to look seriously interested while grade-school girls quoted Bible verses, sang mission songs and received awards. Throughout the program, however, my eyes were riveted on Jeannie. That's another assignment I joyfully accepted throughout our lifetime together!

Jeannie possessed an inner beauty and grace that was growing on me—and a certain "depth" that I realized could not be plumbed with casual conversation or on lighthearted dates. I began looking for every possible opportunity to be with this beautiful girl who had stolen my heart. Jeannie was serious about her faith: earnest, sincere and purehearted in her devotion. I wanted desperately to know her better, and it seemed she desired the same.

Even I was amazed at my sudden burst of creativity! With my encouragement, we began studying together in the school library. Soon we added dinner in the cafeteria as a necessary lead-up to “studying.” To those activities we progressively added lunch, noonday chapel and breakfast. Finally, I suggested that we should meet before breakfast in the chapel for a time of prayer. For the life of me, I cannot remember much about the content of our praying, but I sure remember the joy I experienced kneeling beside Miss “Ambush” at the chapel’s prayer rail!

You’ve got the picture, I’m sure. I was smitten; and, remarkably, so was Jeannie. Our love at first sight was now taking a serious turn. On a brisk night in early December, I took Jeannie to a large tree down by the Ouachita River in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. Taking Jeannie’s hands in mine, and looking into those dark, hazel eyes (I always felt like I’d drown if I leaped into them), I said, “Jeannie, I love you dearly, and after a lot of prayer and searching God’s Word, I believe it is God’s plan for us to be husband and wife. I want to ask ‘Will you marry me?’”

And, for the first time, I gave her a kiss—a sort of clumsy kiss, as I recall—and awaited her answer. To say that Jeannie was taken by surprise would be a vast

understatement. Although she was caught off guard, she wasn't without an appropriate answer—an answer that took me by surprise.

“You have prayed, sought God's Word, and have His leadership to do this! I love you dearly, but I need His confirmation as well!”

This was *not* the answer I was wanting, but it was the right answer. In a daze we both returned to the campus. While I knew it was right and believed Jeannie would discover that as well, my heart longed to hear her say, “I will!”

Fortunately the wait would not be interminable. I later wrote in our wedding book, “I asked Jeannie if she would marry me on December 1, 1965.” After which Jeannie wrote, “I said ‘Yes!’ on December 3, 1965. Afterwards we went to a play, then to a restaurant—we think (!).”

In my study there is a life-size, wood carving of a Canada goose that Jeannie gave me on our thirty-sixth anniversary. It serves as a constant reminder to me that Jeannie also entered our marriage with God's clear instruction. Printed on the goose is this message:

Dear Tom,

In December 1965, the Lord gave me the verse Proverbs 31:12, “She does him good and not evil all the days of her life,” as the promise to

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marry you. Just as the Canada goose faithfully serves one mate for life, I want this goose, sitting in your study, to remind you of my promise regarding you thirty-six years ago.

ILY (I love you), Jeannie

August 20, 1966, Jeannie and I married, beginning what we often called a “glorious gospel adventure together”; an adventure marked with love, intimacy, humor, passion, tears and the sheer joy of serving the King of Kings—together.

From the outset, our lives, Jeannie’s and mine, were lived “together.” During the first year of our marriage, I pastored a church seventy-five miles away from the university we both attended—she as a junior, working toward a degree in elementary education, and I as a graduate student on a teaching fellowship in the history department. Living on the church field required that we drive two hours each morning and evening to school and back. So we drove—and talked.

I’ll admit these newlyweds did a little smooching along the way; but mostly, we talked. We shared about our successes and our failures, our strengths and our weaknesses, our spiritual aspirations as well as our sins, our past and our future. We each eagerly allowed the other to plumb the depths of our heart. What an

incredibly wonderful way to begin a marriage—a practice that just intensified throughout the ensuing years!

Jeannie and I always knew that, regardless of the issues at hand, if we could just *talk with one another* and *talk with God*, everything would be all right. Those were two gifts we both wanted and highly prized.

But there was one issue that Jeannie would bring up from time to time that did not seem to resolve itself as we talked with one another and with God. Jeannie had actually broached the subject a time or two when we were courting. We would come to a resolution of sorts, but ultimately the issue would surface again.

You see, Jeannie could not seem to gain a rock-solid certainty that she was genuinely a child of God, forgiven, indwelt by Christ and headed to heaven. At the age of seven she had “walked the aisle,” saying to herself as she saw a friend go to the altar, “Well, if he can do that, so can I.”

Earnestly desiring to “do everything right,” Jeannie “prayed the prayer,” was baptized that very evening and began practicing the devotion and Christian disciplines that would always characterize her life. Church became her second home. She was involved in choirs, youth groups, mission trips, even “surrendering her life to missions,” and later becoming a leader in a mission’s

organization for young girls. Jeannie loved being a pastor's wife and considered the role a wonderful gift from God. But, deep inside her heart, Jeannie lacked assurance.

As we would talk freely about her lack of assurance, I would carefully explain the gospel, pray with her, and assure Jeannie that Christ always keeps His word.

Sometimes we would even go through a type of "mental gymnastics," asking if she had repented and believed in the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work on the cross and the reality and power of the resurrection, surrendering to Him in absolute faith. There was no part of the "formula" that she denied. Still, there was no assurance; and the Lord, in His mercy, continued to bring conviction to her heart.

Looking back, I'm confident that on occasion Jeannie would even pray what I have often called the "nothing prayer." That's the prayer that begs, "Lord, if I'm not saved, save me."

That kind of praying really accomplishes nothing since it is not born out of the genuine conviction that one is lost, nor does it bring the certainty of salvation. Otherwise it would not have to be repeated again and again, merely adding false hope to an already weak faith.



On Sunday, July 4, 1971, after five years as a pastor's wife, the births of our first two children and being, without question, the most gracious and godly lady you could imagine, Jeannie was born into God's family. Jeannie came into the bathroom where I was shaving and said, "Tom, I am convinced that I am not saved and that I have never truly repented of my sin, and believed in Christ alone for my salvation."

Kneeling together at the end of our bed, Jeannie poured out her heart in confession and repentance of sin. At last, Jeannie had placed her faith in Christ alone and was born into God's family. From that moment on, my wife, the most spiritual person I knew, was finally and fully convinced of her salvation. I was utterly unprepared for the quantum change that would take place in Jeannie's life.

When she was baptized at church that very Sunday evening, I noted that my wife had now become my sister in Christ. I knew the angels in heaven were rejoicing with us, but Jeannie's joy was also without measure! Her new birth spawned a voracious appetite for God's Word and a remarkable zeal for sharing the gospel with others.

Jeannie's pure joy, her appetite for the Word, and her effectiveness in introducing others to Christ, coupled with a loving spirit and a listening heart, never

diminished over the years that followed. Those years saw the addition of two more children and twenty-five grandchildren to our family. With the Spirit of God at work in our lives, we began to see God's true purpose for our marriage.

We relished the privilege of being on this “glorious gospel adventure together”—an adventure that took us to three postseminary churches; an almost two-year stint on the mission field in Zimbabwe, Africa; and then seven more years serving the Lord with International Mission Board, first as senior vice president, and ultimately, as president. What a privilege to work alongside some of the world's finest people—in the churches we served, on the mission field and with the team at International Mission Board.

No life, of course, is totally without its stringent tests and severe trials, and we faced our share. We moved overseas, away from the arms of a loving church and dear family members. Then, a tragic auto accident on the African mission field left one daughter severely burned and precipitated a return stateside. We lost two homes: one by fire and another blown away by a tornado.

There were always the challenges of meeting the ongoing needs of our own growing family coupled with the constant demands of the church families we were

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privileged to serve. Within each of these, there were various times of testing. But Jeannie and I never considered anything we faced to be either “devastating” or “overwhelmingly hopeless” because we were confident the Lord was in control. We would just talk with the Lord—and with one another.

The Lord and one another, those were our most *wanted* gifts, and we were glad to be the recipients of both. Whatever the challenges, the presence of those two gifts seemed to settle everything.

Everything except *the unwanted gift*.

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## OUR STORY

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It was well after midnight when Jeannie found me in the kitchen, sobbing uncontrollably, copious tears splashing down on my outstretched hands. I had started weeping while lying in bed beside Jeannie. Not wanting to awaken her, I moved to my study. But even there, I was unable to contain the volume of my sobbing.

In hopes of not disturbing Jeannie, I moved to the kitchen at the other end of the house. Even from that distance, my crying had awakened her.

You see, earlier that day, Jeannie and I had listened in stunned disbelief as our oncologist explained the presence and extent of the cancer invading her body.

At that time I had forty-four years of ministry under my belt and had already walked this path with countless others. So I knew we were in for a long journey; and I would rather take a beating all day than see Jeannie hurt for a minute—but it wasn't to be! Standing at the kitchen counter that night, I was recalling all those sweet ladies who in the past had asked pleadingly, "Pastor, will you pray for me as I start my chemo this week." I was thinking of the men and women whom I'd sought to comfort after the abrupt loss of their spouse to disease or an accident. (Even today, I'd like to gather them all together

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in one room, have them take off their shoes, and just get down on my knees and kiss their feet while saying, “I had no idea at the time what you were going through.”) Now, it appeared quite possible that their journey would become ours as well.

To us, this unwanted gift felt like a large block of ice. It was too wet and cold to embrace, and too heavy and slippery to hold at a distance. Yet, as unwanted as it was, it was still our gift. Summoning every reserve of faith within our hearts, we realized we were being called to enroll in God’s “school of grace.”

But for the moment, we returned to bed, held each other tightly, talked with one another . . . and talked with God.