

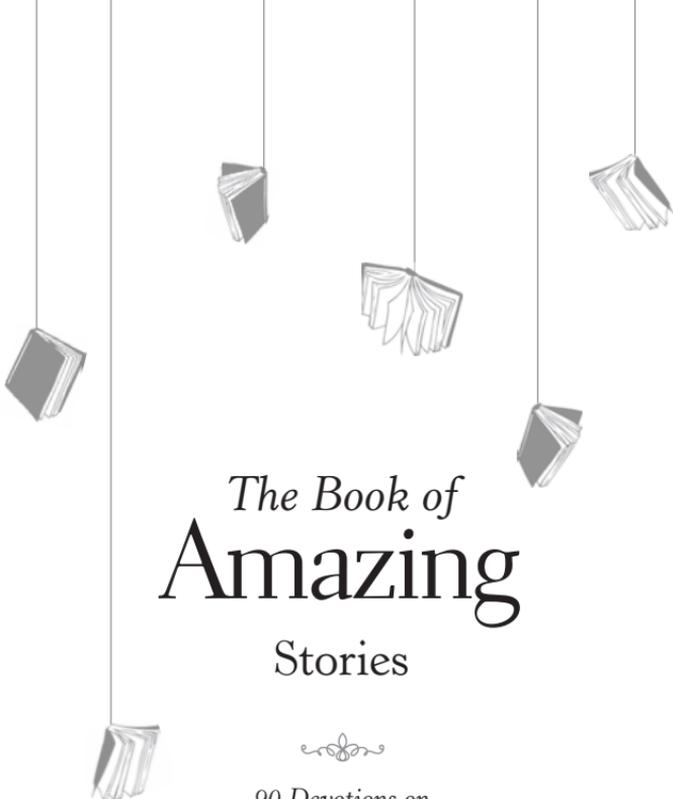
*The Book of*  
**Amazing  
Stories**

*90 Devotions on  
Seeing God's Hand  
in Unlikely Places*

**Robert Petterson**

*The Book of Amazing Stories*





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*The Book of Amazing Stories: 90 Devotions on Seeing God's Hand in Unlikely Places*

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## Introduction

According to an old Yiddish proverb, “God made man because he loves stories.” Indeed, God must love stories: not only is the Bible full of tales of adventure and intrigue and love, but we humans are also full of stories ourselves. Stories have the capacity to touch something deep within us—something that goes beyond mere facts and logic. They have the power to speak the truth to us, to transform us, to remind us that we are not alone, and to inspire us to believe that the impossible is surely possible.

The stories tucked inside these pages are about real people like you and me. These individuals have lived in every historical age and come from every walk of life. Each has left footprints deeply embedded in our world, often in ways that astound. In these stories, you will discover that there are no little people or small places.

Some stories will ignite your imagination. Others will

catch you by surprise as you learn amazing things you never knew about people you thought you knew. In each one, you will see God's hand at work in the most unexpected places.

In the ninety days ahead, you will find a new story each day to recharge your spiritual batteries. Each entry ends with a thought-provoking principle as well as an accompanying Bible verse to carry you through the day.

It is my hope that these stories will amaze, inspire, and encourage you as much as they have me. History, after all, is really *his* story. The stories in this book prove that each person's story is his—and so is yours. Maybe, as you read, you'll discover that the great Storyteller is weaving together a wonderful story in your own life as well.

*Dr. Robert Petterson*

## The Woman Who Tore down the Wall



**H**istory books will never tell you that Nellie Clyde Wilson ended the Cold War. But history often overlooks its most important people.

Nellie was a little wisp of a woman, born the youngest of seven kids in a small town on the road to nowhere. Despite her strict Presbyterian upbringing, she fell head over heels in love with a dashing Irish Catholic named Jack.

It wasn't long after the wedding that Jack began to show his true colors. Brought up in a family of hard drinkers, Jack had a taste for whiskey. Jobs were hard to come by, and it didn't help that Jack's drunkenness got him repeatedly fired. Their family was forced to move at least ten times in fourteen years. Nellie eked out a meager living by taking in sewing and laundry, and somehow managed to make the meals stretch for Jack and their two boys. Most months she barely scraped together the rent money. Yet she never lost her sense of humor or optimism. Her youngest boy often recalled that she was the most positive woman in his life.

Mostly, her boys observed the way she loved Jesus. They went with her to the jailhouse, bringing hot food to prisoners. They watched her subsist on crackers because she had taken her meal next door to a sick neighbor. When Jack complained about her tithing to the church, Nellie good-naturedly replied that God would make their ninety percent twice as big if he got his tenth.

Nellie was a bit player in small-town America. You might never have known who she was if it hadn't been for her sons. They flourished under her unbounded optimism and grew strong observing her heroic faith. She steeled them with discipline and lavished them with love. Every night she read her boys stories about good and evil. Her youngest son's favorite was about a knight in shining armor who conquered an evil empire. From Nellie, this little boy learned how to dream big and overcome impossible odds. She nurtured his love for acting and told him that he could change the world. Most of all, she taught him to love God.

The world remembers this wisp of a woman by her married name: Nellie (Nelle) Clyde Wilson Reagan. The son she nicknamed Dutch grew up to live out his mother's bedtime story, becoming the knight in shining armor who triumphed over an evil empire. President Ronald Reagan often said that his mother was the most influential person in his life.

Could it be that this diminutive washerwoman from a small town in Illinois was the one who tore down the Berlin

Wall and set millions free from Communist tyranny because of a dream that she instilled in her son?

As you ponder your own life story, you might take heart from something that Nellie wrote in her well-worn Bible:

*You can be too big for God to use, but you can never be too small.*



He gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say,  
“God opposes the proud but gives  
grace to the humble.”

JAMES 4:6

## A Mouse That Roared



He hated the name that his missionary mother gave him at birth. As a runt fighting for a spot on the rugby fields, he figured that *Henry* was a sissy's name. But it wasn't as bad as the nickname his classmates gave him: the Mouse.

After college, the Mouse returned to China to teach chemistry at a boys' school. When bloody civil war broke out, he went where the fighting was fiercest. His wife begged him not to go, but he was determined to go to those in greatest need. When the Japanese later invaded China, the Mouse sent his family to Canada but refused to leave his mission. It wasn't long before he landed in a concentration camp. He was a quiet hero in that barbed-wire mission field before a brain tumor threatened his life. Winston Churchill pleaded with the Japanese to release him. But when the prisoner exchange took place, the Mouse gave up his spot to a pregnant woman. Not long after, he died in that Japanese camp.

Why was this prisoner so important that the British prime minister personally intervened for his release? Perhaps Churchill recalled a day twenty years earlier when the Mouse roared on the center stage of Olympic history. In 1924 Henry

was known by his middle name, Eric. Sportswriters called him the Flying Scotsman. You might have watched his inspiring story in the Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire*. At the Paris Olympics he won a gold medal. But a number of Olympians did that in 1924.

The Mouse made headlines for another reason: he refused to run when he discovered that the qualifying heats for his races were set for Sunday. Raised a strict Presbyterian, he believed that it was a sin to compete in athletics on the Sabbath. So the Mouse decided that standing on principle trumped running for gold. When the British Olympic committee pleaded with him to run for king and country, he refused to budge. His stand seems quaintly old-fashioned in an age where sports dominate our Sundays.

The Mouse went to church while others competed. He lost two gold medals but gained the respect of the world for his unwavering integrity. Later that week, he did win a gold medal, setting a world record that stood for a decade. Could it be that this principled stand in Paris produced a hero in China twenty years later? Maybe it was his character as much as his athletic prowess that led to a 2002 poll naming him Scotland's most popular sports figure of all time.

Mice can roar like lions when there's conviction in their bellies. A single mouse standing its ground has been known to stampede bull elephants. You might not agree with Henry Eric Liddell's views on the Sabbath, but in an age

of compromise his story is worth remembering. There are some principles that far outweigh gold medals. Certainly this much is true:

*If you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything.*



Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

MATTHEW 7:13-14, NIV

## The Triumph of Bubbles



When Belle Silverman was born with bubbles in her mouth, her immigrant mother gave her a nickname that lasted a lifetime. Yet life was anything but bubbly for the girl called Bubbles. Brooklyn neighbors exclaimed that her golden curls and precocious talent made her a Jewish Shirley Temple. Those compliments became a curse when her obsessive stage mom stole Bubbles's childhood by dragging her to endless auditions for roles in radio, movies, and vaudeville. Mrs. Silverman was sure that her Shirley Temple look-alike was their ticket out of poverty. Repeated rejections at those auditions traumatized little Bubbles. So did the look of disappointment in her mother's eyes.

When she was sixteen, her voice teacher said that she was tailor made for the opera. But nothing ever came easy for Bubbles. She spent ten frustrating years on the road trying to make it in second-tier operas. The New York City Opera turned her down seven times before they accepted her. When Bubbles finally snagged a starring role, critics panned her performances as uneven. Leading opera houses refused to let her appear on their stages. It was only after she went to

Europe and won over the toughest opera fans in the world that critics begrudgingly recognized her magnificent voice.

Even when she became a star at the Met and *Time* magazine dubbed her America's Queen of the Opera, her adoring public never knew that Bubbles was raising two children with disabilities. One of them was severely cognitively disabled. She spent a fortune building a sanctuary for her kids in Martha's Vineyard. After they moved in, it burned to the ground. Then her husband collapsed with a stroke. She cared for him for eight years while raising two children with special needs and juggling a demanding career.

You might think that a lifetime of setbacks would make Belle Silverman from Crown Heights a sour woman. But the lady nicknamed Bubbles plowed through her troubles with infectious joy. Barbara Walters called her the happiest person on earth. After a *Sixty Minutes* interview, Mike Wallace said that she was the most impressive person he had ever met. When he asked her how she had overcome bitterness to be so bubbly, she replied, "I can't control the circumstances of my life, but I can choose to be joyful."

You may remember Belle Silverman by her stage name, Beverly Sills. When Belle died in 2007, a *New York Times* obituary proclaimed the Brooklyn-born coloratura soprano to be America's most popular opera star since Enrico Caruso. But to family and friends, she will always remain Bubbles. Two years before her death, she summed up her challenges

and triumphs to a *Times* reporter: “Man plans, and God laughs. I’ve never considered myself a happy woman. How could I be with all that’s happened to me? But I choose to be a cheerful woman.” When you face speed bumps on life’s road, it might help to recall this line from Bubbles:

*Circumstances are often beyond your choice, but you can choose to be cheerful.*



Worry weighs a person down; an  
encouraging word cheers a person up.

PROVERBS 12:25

## The Man of a Million Lies



**H**is Italian mother named him after Saint Mark in the hopes that he would always tell the gospel truth. Yet when he later wrote a bestseller about his travels, cynics called it a book of a million lies. He was nicknamed Mark of a Million Lies.

In the 1200s, Europeans found it impossible to believe Mark's tales of a twenty-four-year odyssey that took him across the steppes of Russia, over mountains in Afghanistan, through deserts in Persia, and around the Himalayas into the far reaches of Asia.

Mark was one of the first Europeans to enter China. Through amazing circumstances, he became a favorite of the most powerful man on earth. Kublai Khan ruled over a domain that eclipsed the ancient Roman Empire. Mark saw cities that made Western capitals look like roadside villages. The khan's palace dwarfed the largest cathedrals and castles in Europe. It was so massive that its banquet hall could seat six thousand guests, all dining on plates of pure gold. He saw the world's first paper money and marveled at the explosive power of gunpowder. It would be five hundred years before

Europe would produce as much steel as China manufactured in 1267, and six hundred years before the Pony Express would equal the speed of Kublai Khan's postal service.

Mark began his journey home to Venice loaded down with gold, silk, and spices. According to some accounts, tucked away in his pocket was a recipe for that Chinese culinary delight, pasta. The khan had sent him on his way with a royal guard of one thousand men. By the time they reached the Indian Ocean, six hundred had drowned or died of disease. A ragged Mark barely limped home, most of his riches lost along the way.

Folks dismissed his stories, and it wasn't long before he landed in jail. In that lonely dungeon, he dictated his fantastic yarns to a writer of romance novels. Those stories were marketed as *The Travels of Marco Polo*. But a skeptical public dismissed it as a book of a million lies.

Mark got out of that prison and went on to make another fortune. Yet he never shook that moniker, Marco the Liar. As he lay on his deathbed, his family, friends, and parish priest implored him to recant his fabrications lest they land him in hell. Mark spit out his final words: "I have not even told you half of what I saw."

Medieval cynics dismissed his stories as the tall tales of a lunatic or a liar. Yet history has established the credibility of *The Travels of Marco Polo*. A century later, another Italian read Mark's stories. By the time Christopher Columbus finished

them, a dream was sparked that he, too, could discover new worlds.

Is there anything sadder than folks who are afraid to dream big or explore new worlds? Don't you dare be one of them! Allow Mark's story to send you out today with a sense of excitement, keeping this in mind:

*You haven't seen the half of all the wonders that are still out there.*



Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:9, NKJV

## When Faith Walked across Niagara Falls



Niagara Falls is some kind of monster. Less than a handful of daredevils have challenged its fury and lived to tell about it. It's no wonder that more than one hundred thousand spectators gathered there and millions more tuned in to ABC to watch Nik Wallenda's death-defying aerial feat.

Nothing was left to chance in June of 2012. A 1,800-foot-long, two-inch-thick steel cable weighing seven tons was pulled across the falls by machines, stretched taut, and then secured by bolts driven deep into bedrock. Supporting cables were attached to the main wire to make sure it couldn't sway. The aerial artist wore the latest high-tech clothing and shoes. His sponsors required that he wear a harness that tethered him safely to the high wire. Protected by all these precautions, Wallenda completed the walk to the delight of the crowd, ABC television, his corporate sponsors, and his nervous family.

If only you could have been there on June 30, 1859. This time the daredevil was the Great Blondin. His aerial acrobatics had thrilled audiences across the world. Yet Niagara

Falls would be the Frenchman's greatest challenge. Blondin didn't take the same precautions that Nik Wallenda would take some 150 years later. Instead of a steel cable, he walked on a two-inch-thick Manila rope. No machines pulled it taut, and no cables held it steady. He refused to wear a safety harness. Instead of high-tech gear, he donned Turkish pantaloons and Persian slippers. He carried a wooden pole five times heavier than Wallenda's. Because his high wire was a 1,300-foot stretch of rope, Blondin walked downhill to the middle, some fifty feet below where he began, and back uphill to the end.

Wallenda performed his aerial extravaganza once. Blondin did his daredevil feats repeatedly over two summers, each time doing something more stupefying. He crossed that Manila rope on a bicycle, on stilts, and in the pitch black of night. Once he pushed a stove on a wheelbarrow and cooked an omelet high over the falls. On another occasion he climbed into a gunnysack blindfolded and then shuffled across that rope. As amazing as Wallenda's *one* feat might have seemed in 2012, Blondin's many stunts were far more electrifying in 1859.

But history mostly recalls that day when he asked ten thousand spectators if they believed that he could carry a man on his shoulders across Niagara Falls. The crowd responded with a roar of affirmation. He retorted, "Who then will get up on my back?" No one moved. So Blondin turned

to his manager, Harry Colcord, and ordered him to climb up on his shoulders. Colcord was petrified, but he had promoted the Frenchman too long to back down. He later said that his half-hour ride on Blondin's shoulders was an eternity of terror.

Faith is not a spectator sport. It's one thing to experience adventure vicariously through someone else's high-risk faith. It's quite another to walk the high wire yourself. Today God may call you to climb on his shoulders and cross over some scary place. If so, something Corrie ten Boom wrote might help:

*Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.*



Now faith is confidence in what we hope for  
and assurance about what we do not see.

HEBREWS 11:1, NIV

## A Shoemaker Who Changed the World



**W**illie was a stuttering plodder. The only job he could get was as a shoemaker's apprentice. The only girl who would marry him was Dorothy, who suffered from mental illness. But everything changed for Willie when he read a runaway bestseller. Most who read Captain Cook's journal were captivated by the exploits of a daring explorer. But Willie saw vast human needs in faraway places. He fashioned a world globe from leather scraps. After staring at it, he sobbed, "Here am I, Lord. Send me!"

Protestants were not sending foreign missionaries in the 1700s. When Willie stammered out his vision at a meeting of Calvinistic Baptists, an old pastor angrily shouted, "Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without you or me!" Others tried to dissuade Willie by reminding him that he was a shoemaker saddled with a crazy wife. Someone said, "Face it, William: you're unfit." He stuttered, "B-b-but I c-c-can p-p-plod!"

For the next eleven years, Willie plodded until he could read the Bible in Latin, Greek, Dutch, and French. He was

finally licensed to preach. When he wasn't in the pulpit of his tiny church, he rode across England, stuttering a message: "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." Fortified by that credo, he gathered like-minded pastors to establish the Baptist Mission Society. He was so poor that he couldn't contribute a single penny to his new venture.

Yet he managed to collect a handful of missionaries and some pitiful resources to go to India. In 1793 they might as well have been going to the moon. His wife sat on the dock, refusing to leave. Twice Willie had to get on his knees and beg her to board the ship. When the missionaries arrived in India, Hindu radicals tried to kill them. The British East India Company refused to let them travel inland. Willie's five-year-old son died, and Dorothy lost her mind completely.

Willie labored seven years before he saw his first conversion. After twenty years, he had only a handful of converts. His first wife died, and then his second. But he continued to plod. When he died in 1834 at age seventy-three, he had translated the Bible into thirty-four languages, founded India's first college, established forty-five teaching centers, alleviated famine by teaching new agricultural methods, and worked to free Indian women from the cruelest sorts of bondage.

If you visit India today, you can find Willie's statue close to the parliament building. Even Hindus celebrate him as

one of their nation's greatest heroes. History recalls Willie by his full name, William Carey. He has been dubbed the Father of Modern Missions. But he would be more impressed to know that some 25 million people in India have called Jesus Christ their Savior, and today there are five times more Christians in India than in England. Maybe you're just a plodder like Willie, in a place as small as a village cobbler's shop. Yet as long as you can plod, you can do so much more, if only you do what he did:

*Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.*



I am the LORD, the God of all the peoples of  
the world. Is anything too hard for me?

JEREMIAH 32:27