



101
Amazing
Stories
of Hope & Faith

Inspiring Stories from Real Life

Robert Petterson

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A sunburst graphic consisting of numerous thin, radiating lines of varying lengths, centered behind the number 101.

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101 Amazing Stories of Hope and Faith: Inspiring Stories from Real Life

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*These amazing stories are dedicated to three
generations of amazing females . . .*

*JOYCE, my wife,
a remarkable woman whose unfailing love and
steadfast support have given beauty, substance,
and wonder to our story together.*

*RACHAEL, our attorney daughter,
a woman of force and unfailing compassion, champion of
the powerless, whose tireless work transforms the stories
of the sojourners among us from despair to hope.*

*MAE and MIRA, our granddaughters,
whose infectious joy, determination, and insatiable curiosity
will continue our amazing story for generations to come.*

Introduction

J. K. Rowling says, “There’s always room for a story that can transport people to another place.” Great stories take us to the hidden places of our unexplored imagination. They have the capacity to touch something deep within us—something that goes beyond mere facts and cold logic to empower us with transforming insights. Stories remind us that we are not alone and inspire us to believe that the impossible is actually possible. That’s why God fills the Bible with epic tales of adventure, intrigue, and love—and why, when Jesus wanted to move people, he told stories.

The amazing stories tucked inside these pages are about real people like you and me. These folks have lived in every age and come from every walk of life. Yet the footprints they leave behind can embed themselves deeply in our own lives, often in ways that astound. In these stories, you will discover that there are no little people, small places, or unimportant encounters.

Some of these stories will ignite your imagination. Others will catch you by surprise as you discover amazing things about people you thought you knew. In each one, you will see God’s truths illustrated in the most unexpected ways.

It's my hope that these stories will inform, inspire, and transform you as much as they have me. Most of all, I hope they will inspire you to tell your own story. I believe this about you: the best lines and chapters of your amazing life story are still waiting to be written.

Dr. Robert Petterson

The Most Courageous Man in America



In 1986 Italian runner Gianni Poli won the New York City Marathon in two hours and eleven minutes. In 2003, Mark Yatch of Kenya triumphed at the Los Angeles Marathon in a time of two hours and ten minutes.

But the greatest marathons of all time may have been run by the guy who finished dead last in both races, in the slowest times ever recorded. In 1986 he completed the New York City race in about ninety-eight hours. It took him a little more than 173 hours to cross the finish line at Los Angeles in 2003.

Before you write Bob Wieland off, you need to know that he completed both marathons using only his arms and torso. Bob has no legs. In 1969, while trying to rescue a fallen buddy in Vietnam, he stepped on a mortar round designed to destroy tanks. He sent this short note to his parents:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm in the hospital. Everything is going to be okay.

The people here are taking good care of me.

Love,

Bob

P.S. I think I lost my legs.

Bob could have shriveled up in a wheelchair. Instead, he walked across America on his hands. That exploit took three years, eight months, and six days. He's the only double-amputee

ever to complete the Iron Man Triathlon in Kona, Hawaii, without a wheelchair. He swam 2.4 miles, then biked 112 miles, and finished up with a 26.2-mile marathon using only his arms. He twice made a 6,200-mile round-trip bike ride across America and has amassed four world records in weight lifting, including a 570-pound bench press!

It's no wonder Bob Wieland is called "Mr. Inspiration." The NFL Players Association awarded him the title "The Most Courageous Man in America." *People* magazine dubbed him "one of the six most amazing Americans." After he took more than a week to complete the Los Angeles Marathon while walking on his hands at age fifty-seven, Bob told the Associated Press, "This was supernatural. It was done by the grace of God." He then summed up life without legs: "I do it one step at a time."

Bob Wieland reminds us that the race of life isn't won by the fastest. It's always good to remember that by perseverance and patience the snail made it to Noah's ark before the Flood. Most victories in life are won by plodders. And only the persistent learn to run on their arms after their legs are gone. Maybe the wear and tear of life has put you on the ragged edge of giving up before the race is over. The story of Bob Wieland reminds us that when our legs are gone and our arms are worn to nubs, we can still make it. Bob would agree with something Robert W. Service once wrote:

It's the steady, quiet, plodding ones who win in the lifelong race.



I have observed something else under the sun.
The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, and
the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle.

The Biggest Nation of All



Though his warrior father had carved out a kingdom for the crown prince, it was not big enough. This prince had a voracious appetite that could never be satisfied. That craving for more would send him to the ends of the earth in a never-ending quest that still astounds the world some 2,500 years later.

The crown prince was only twenty years old when his father was assassinated. After rounding up and ruthlessly executing all of his rivals, the boy conqueror began his long march across planet Earth. His army of some thirty thousand warriors blitzkrieged from the Balkans to India in less than thirteen years. They covered some ten thousand miles on sandaled feet, making the mechanized conquests of our high-tech military operations look almost slow by comparison.

The statistics of that amazing odyssey seem almost impossible. This ancient juggernaut conquered countless cities and nations that made up what are now Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Greece, Jordan, Israel, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Arabia, Egypt, the Balkans, and part of India. Its empire stretched from the Aegean to the Himalayas, across three continents. The conqueror's rule spanned more than two million square miles of earth by the time he was thirty-two years of age.

When he reached the Indus River, his bone-weary army refused to take on the war elephants of India. After the better part of two decades, the troops wanted to go home. The ancient

historian Plutarch writes that thirty-two-year-old Alexander the Great sat on the banks of the Indus and wept like a baby because there were no more worlds to conquer. Most historians figure that he would have marched his men all the way to China—if they would have followed him.

With an unsatisfied hunger that still gnawed at his restless soul, Alexander marched back to Babylon, where he drank himself into a stupor. In June of the year 323 BC, he died at age thirty-two. The cause of his death is still mysterious. Most likely it was typhoid fever, but some suspect that his generals, who carved up his empire after his death, might have poisoned him.

He was carried in an ornate casket back to Alexandria in Egypt, one of the more than seventy cities that he named after himself. That airtight burial box became the final resting place of a man for whom the world was never big enough. His tutor, Aristotle, often lamented that young Alexander could conquer the world, but he was never able to conquer his own passions or imaginations.

Perhaps the biggest nation of all is our imagination. Certainly, Pascal was right when he said that there is within us all a God-shaped vacuum as infinite as God himself. We can possess the whole universe and all that it contains and still not fill that vast emptiness within. If you have a soul hunger, you might want to remember this:

When too much is never enough, give yourself to the infinite one, who is more than enough.



You are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession.

The Forgotten Explorer



When his parents died, Matt dropped out of school and became a dishwasher. He was only twelve when a Baltimore ship captain took him on as a cabin boy. That skipper was the closest thing Matt ever had to a father. The captain showed the orphan how to read, write, and navigate a ship. Matt learned skills that would take him where no man had ever ventured.

When the ship's captain died, Matt was again on his own. He returned to Washington, DC, where he met the second man who would change his life. Captain Robert E. Peary was sailing south to survey the feasibility of a canal across Nicaragua. When he met Matt, he was surprised that an eighteen-year-old knew so much about navigation. So he hired the teen as his personal valet. During their two years in Central America, Peary's vision to explore the Arctic Circle ignited a passion in Matt. Their shared dream would yoke them together for twenty years of history-making exploration.

In 1895 they traveled to Greenland on a trip that turned to disaster. They barely survived the winter by eating their sled dogs. When they found refuge with an Inuit tribe, Matt became the first American to master their difficult language. He also learned how to build dogsleds, kayaks, and igloos, taking tips from the locals in surviving the harsh Arctic. Peary knew that his valet was the key to making it to the North Pole.

After several failed attempts, in 1908 they began their final shot at reaching the northernmost point on the planet. The two mushed north with forty-nine Inuits, more than two hundred

dogs, seventy tons of whale blubber, and countless sleds full of supplies—slogging a trail through ice fields, across yawning crevices, and over towering glaciers. They did so in the face of howling winds, endless night, and temperatures that plunged to sixty-five degrees below zero. It was one of the most harrowing trips in history. As they finally came within sight of their goal, Captain Peary was exhausted, so Matt continued on, becoming the first man in history to stand at the North Pole. He then went back to get Peary. The captain was livid that his valet had planted the first flag, and forever after refused to speak to him. Matt later said that the North Pole was the place where his heart was broken.

The party arrived home to a hero's welcome. In 1909, their feat was like landing a man on the moon. Proud Americans feted Captain Peary with parades and receptions, applauding him as the first man to stand at the North Pole. Nobody took notice of Matt. Yet today the world knows it was really Matthew Henson who was the first to reach the North Pole. Maybe if he hadn't been African American or if he hadn't been Peary's valet, he'd have been recognized sooner. But some thirty-five years after the journey, Matt was finally awarded the Medal of Honor.

Perhaps you feel like Matthew Henson. You work hard, but others get the applause you deserve. Please don't let that make you discouraged or bitter. Remember this:

God sees everything, forgets nothing, and rewards what others miss.



Look, I am coming soon, bringing my reward with me to repay all people according to their deeds.

Antonina's Ark



Antonina adored the wild outdoors. Mostly she loved nurturing the cuddly offspring of wild animals. She was grateful that her husband, Jan, was the keeper of the Warsaw Zoo. Every morning Antonina awakened to the sounds of one of the largest menageries of exotic animals in Europe. She turned the grounds of their villa into a Garden of Eden where she and her young son bottle-fed a variety of orphan cubs during birthing season. On any given day, visitors could see wild antelopes and zebras grazing on the Zabinskis' property. If asked to explain her love affair with wild animals, she would quickly say that, as a Christian, she was responsible to care for God's creation.

But the serpent stole into her Eden when the German blitzkrieg rolled across Poland and the Luftwaffe bombed Warsaw into rubble. The zoo was almost obliterated, along with many of the world's most exotic animals. Antonina was devastated when Nazi SS arrived to round up what was left. Most of the surviving animals were shipped to Germany. The SS turned the ruined grounds into their private game preserve, hunting down the few creatures that were left behind. After their killing spree ended, the renowned Warsaw Zoo was eerily empty.

When the Nazis unexpectedly made Jan the superintendent of parks, God opened doors that would turn a massacre into a miracle. Not far from their deserted zoo, one of the monstrous evils of the twentieth century was taking place in the Jewish ghetto. No lions or tigers could be more beastly than the SS

predators who were systematically starving thousands even as trains were arriving to transport the rest to death camps.

So the Zabinskis hatched a plan to turn the rubble of dashed dreams into building blocks for something far better. Antonina later said that the destruction of their zoo was “not the dream of death . . . but merely ‘winter sleep.’” Jan turned the empty zoo into a pig farm. The Nazis were amused. They could never imagine that the zookeeper was cleverly using his position as the director of Warsaw parks to smuggle pork into a starving ghetto to feed Orthodox Jews. Nor did they know that the empty cages in the zoo had been turned into a labyrinth of hiding places for more than three hundred Jews smuggled out of the ghetto.

You can read the amazing story of this heroic couple in Diane Ackerman’s book *The Zookeeper’s Wife*. If you find yourself at the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, you can see their tree planted along the Avenue of the Righteous among the Nations, which honors Gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews during the Nazi Holocaust.

The story of the Zabinskis reminds us that God sometimes allows us to lose good things so that our hands are free to grab hold of better things. When Antonina’s Garden of Eden was destroyed, she could have wallowed in the wreckage of her dreams. Instead, she and her husband replaced exotic animals with pigs to feed starving Jews and used the rubble of their zoo to build a Noah’s ark to save endangered people. If your dream has died, this truth might help:

The rubble of broken dreams provides the building blocks of future hope.



The LORD is close to the brokenhearted;
he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.

A Dog's Tale



Stroll through Greyfriars on a rare sunny day, and it seems like an idyllic cemetery. But at night it becomes the rendezvous of ghost hunters. They claim it is the most-haunted graveyard in the world: a spooky place where body snatchers robbed graves; a makeshift prison where Presbyterian Covenanters were murdered; the place where the poltergeist of George MacKenzie, orchestrator of the unspeakable horrors endured by those Covenanters, is released each night to wander his killing fields. No wonder J. K. Rowling wrote her Harry Potter stories about wizards and witches in a coffee shop across from Greyfriars.

Yet at the entrance to the phantasmagoria of Greyfriars is the statue of a wee Skye terrier. Thousands of tourists come to this spot each year, proving that a dog's tale is better than any ghost story. This diminutive terrier was a familiar sight in the 1850s as he trotted beside his master on his nightly rounds. The policeman and his puppy were inseparable pals. But the man they dubbed Auld Jock was dying of tuberculosis. Scots openly wept when he was carried to Greyfriars on a February day in 1858. But most of their tears were for the forlorn little terrier leading the procession. After Auld Jock's burial, the dog he called Bobby refused to leave. Grave diggers shooed him away, but he clung to the freshly dug grave.

Stormy weather, freezing nights, and the ghost of George MacKenzie could not dislodge the grieving pet. The keeper of the churchyard, Auld Jock's family, and well-meaning locals couldn't entice him away. Month after month and year after year, he

growled menacingly at anyone who came too close to his master's grave marker. Crowds came to Greyfriars just to see Bobby. The wee Skye terrier only left Auld Jock's gravesite at one o'clock each afternoon at the firing of the cannon in Edinburgh's old fortress. He would cross the cobblestone street to a pub where he was fed table scraps and then return to his faithful watch. The terrier lived well beyond his breed's normal life span, finally dying on Auld Jock's grave. He is buried next to his master, with these words on his granite marker: "Greyfriars Bobby—died 14th January 1872—aged 16 years. Let his loyalty and devotion be a lesson to us all."

Recently an English grinch tried to prove that this story was a Victorian hoax, using a series of dogs to impersonate Bobby. But even this spoilsport admits, "It won't ever be possible to debunk the story of Greyfriars Bobby—he's a living legend, the most faithful dog in the world, and bigger than all of us." Those of us who love our pets prefer to believe Bobby's amazing story. We are thankful to God for giving us our faithful companions. We even harbor a belief that they will be waiting for us in heaven. We might all agree with a pet owner's sentiments:

My goal in life is to become the person my dog already thinks I am.



Just ask the animals, and they will teach you.
Ask the birds of the sky, and they will tell you.

JOB 12:7