

When Pain Becomes Purpose; How Gratitude for God's Mercy Changes Everything



World War II history has always fascinated me. I was raised on stories of my grandfather—a top gunner and flight mechanic in the 8th Air Force—who completed 34 missions over Germany in a B-17 bomber aptly named *Flak Magnet* before the war ended in 1944. Two-thirds of the men who served in the 8th Air Force were killed, wounded, or captured. Many survivors carried lifelong psychological scars. Yet from that crucible emerged those we now call the Greatest Generation.

My grandfather was a favorite among the grandkids. He was so calm and kind. He whistled while he worked, never complained, and when he smashed his thumb with a hammer, he would chuckle, shake off the blood, and keep going. Though his service made him a hero to us, he rarely spoke of it. Only after his death at age ninety-six did I learn that when he returned home and married my grandmother, severe PTSD and night terrors nearly destroyed their marriage.

My grandfather's quiet faith came to mind as I recently read *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand—the extraordinary story of Louis Zamperini, an Olympic athlete turned World War II airman who survived unimaginable suffering as a Japanese prisoner of war.



Zamperini was born in 1917 to Italian immigrant parents. As a boy, he was a troublemaker until his older brother, Pete, persuaded him to channel his energy into running. Pete was right. In 1936, at just twenty-one years old, Zamperini set a world record for the fastest final lap in Olympic history.

Three years later, with the outbreak of war, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps and became a bombardier. During a rescue mission, their plane—the *Green Hornet*—crashed into the Pacific. Only Zamperini, the pilot Phil, and tail gunner Mac survived. For forty-seven days they drifted on a life raft, enduring starvation, exposure, and shark attacks. Mac eventually died of malnutrition.

Zamperini and Phil were captured by the Japanese. That “rescue” marked the beginning of another ordeal. Sent to POW camps, Zamperini was singled out for brutal abuse by a sadistic guard, Mutsuhiro Watanabe, known as *The Bird*. At one point, the Japanese informed him that the U.S. government had declared him dead and offered him food,

clean bedding, and relief from torture if he would record a propaganda broadcast criticizing America. Zamperini courageously refused.

As Allied forces closed in, POWs were slated for extermination. Starving and barely hanging onto life, the men watched American B-24s fly overhead and wondered if freedom would come in time. One week before the scheduled executions, the atomic bomb was dropped, and the war abruptly ended.

Zamperini was rescued and returned home a hero—but found himself in a new kind of prison. In his dreams, *The Bird* tormented him. Hatred consumed him, and alcohol became his only escape. As his life unraveled, Zamperini lived for one purpose alone: to return to Japan and kill *The Bird*.

Finally, his wife persuaded him to—reluctantly—attend a Billy Graham revival meeting. He left partway through, swearing never to return. Believing it was his last hope, she convinced him to go once more. This time the sermon was on Christ's response to the woman caught in adultery. Again, agitated, Zamperini rose to leave—but suddenly felt as though the preacher was speaking directly to him.

The internal barricade he had constructed crumbled. A memory flooded back: a breathtaking sunset over the open ocean as he drifted on the raft, when even starving men were overwhelmed by God's beauty and peace. He remembered praying that night—promising God that if He spared them, he would serve Him all his life.

God had spared him. Zamperini had not kept his promise.

More memories followed—moment after moment of strength, deliverance, and mercy. He was overwhelmed by the realization that **God had never abandoned him.**

That night, Zamperini returned home and poured out every bottle of alcohol. He never drank again. The nightmares ended. *The Bird* never returned. For the first time since the war, he was truly free.

For the rest of his life, Louis Zamperini served others—especially troubled young men—bearing witness of the grace that saved him.

Every generation faces its own crucible. While challenges will vary, the struggle to find peace and hope amid hardship remains the same. If we are wise, we may learn from those who went before us a few enduring, empowering lessons: **the power of conviction and purpose over fear; the power of hope over suffering and tragedy; and the power of grace and gratitude over despair.**