

How Billy Graham's Ministry Impacted Louis Zamperini's Life

Louis Zamperini, World War II prisoner of war survivor, Olympic distance runner and personal friend of Billy Graham, has died at age 97.

Zamperini's gripping story, including how he survived 47 days at sea on a raft after being shot down over the Pacific during Air Force duty, became well known in Laura Hillenbrand's 2010 *New York Times* best-seller, *Unbroken*.

The book also talks about the influence Billy Graham's ministry had on Zamperini's life. During the 1949 Los Angeles Crusade, Zamperini, who was struggling with alcoholism, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and on the brink of divorce, gave his life to Christ at one of Mr. Graham's tent revival services at Washington Boulevard and Hill Street.

More than 60 years later, Mr. Graham was compelled to write Zamperini a letter after hearing a more detailed account of his 1949 life-changing conversion to follow Christ in *Unbroken*.

"Dear Louis," wrote Billy Graham, "My associate read me parts of the new book about you yesterday. What a life you have lived. What a description you have in the book of your conversion to Christ in 1949, and the great part that [your wife] Cynthia played in it, which I was aware of, but not in such detail. I had tears in my eyes and praise in my heart for what God has done through you."

Louis Zamperini speaks at the 1963 Billy Graham Crusade at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

Zamperini visited Mr. Graham in June of 2011 at his home in Montreat, North Carolina, and also visited the Billy Graham Library where he held a book signing at age 94. Zamperini was an inspirational speaker and teamed up with Mr. Graham at several of his Crusades, including San Francisco (1958) and Los Angeles (1963).

Before his conversion, Zamperini was a 5,000-meter runner for the U.S. Olympic Team in the 1936 Berlin Games. He enlisted in the Air Force in 1941, before getting shot down, along with 10 others, in April of 1943.

Eight other men did not survive that crash 850 miles west of Oahu and only Zamperini and one other lasted all 47 days adrift, using two albatrosses to catch fish, while fighting off shark attacks. They were caught by the Japanese Navy and spent over two years at various prisoner-of-war camps.

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