



THE ONE YEAR[®]

Book of
Amazing
Stories



365 Days
of Seeing God's Hand
in Unlikely Places



Robert Petterson



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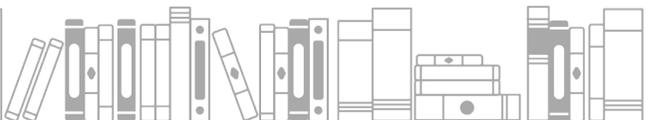
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The One Year Book of Amazing Stories: 365 Days of Seeing God's Hand in Unlikely Places

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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.

In the year ahead, you will unwrap a new story each day to recharge your spiritual batteries. Each will conclude with a thought-provoking life principle as well as an accompanying Bible verse to carry you through the day. In the back of this book, you will find sources allowing you to discover even more about each story. If you are a storyteller yourself, you may want to investigate the topical indexes, which will make it easy for you to access stories for your sermons, classes, public speeches, or after-dinner conversations.

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



A Devastating Rescue



Snow covered Bavaria like a fresh dusting of powdered sugar. On the banks of the icy Inn River, children were playing a game of “cowboys and Indians.” The frosty air was filled with Sioux war cries and shouts of “Bang, bang! You’re dead.” Among the “cowboys and Indians” was a four-year-old boy. He was sickly and frail, small for his age, and wearing thick glasses. Yet he ran with determination, trying desperately to keep up with the galloping herd of children—until he tripped and fell over the embankment. His eyeglasses flew through the air as he broke through the thin sheet of ice. Unable to swim, the frantic boy was swept downriver toward certain death.

Johann Kuehberger was only five years old. But when he heard his playmate scream for help, he jumped into the icy waters and pulled him to safety. Little Johann was proclaimed a hero by the local newspaper in the town of Passau. No one was surprised when this courageous child grew up to be a priest. Johann Kuehberger would spend the rest of his life trying to save those in distress. But saving that childhood playmate from drowning would haunt him to his dying day. A fellow priest, Max Tremmel, revealed that Father Johann spent many sleepless nights obsessing over that rescue in the winter of 1894.

Little Johann might have grown up to serve God, but the child he saved went on to become one of history’s most diabolical monsters. If only five-year-old Johann could have seen the future in that split second before he jumped into the river, he might have stopped dead in his tracks. Surely countless millions would have been spared terror and death—if only little Adolf Hitler had drowned that day.

Hitler often reminisced about his childhood games of “cowboys and

Indians” on the banks of the Inn River. But he never mentioned the near drowning. He wasn’t about to spoil the Nazi myth of a superman Führer by admitting that he had been saved by a future priest of a religion he despised. Yet reporters have uncovered the story of his rescue from old files in Passau. A recent program on Bavarian radio got folks thinking: *What if Hitler had drowned?*

Every act has consequences. We can never know what the future will do with our decisions and actions. Sadly, Father Johann wasted far too many nights second-guessing himself. Ultimately, we cannot control the outcomes of our acts. But we can worry too much. Maybe you’re filled with regrets or bitterness for the painful consequences of yesterday’s choices. Or perhaps you hesitate to make decisions today for fear of how they will play out tomorrow. You might find some freedom from the paralysis of analysis if you remember this:

Do the best you can do, and leave the results to God.



Commit your actions to the LORD,
and your plans will succeed.

PROVERBS 16:3

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.

ECCLESIASTES 9:11

The Irresistible Power of Courage



Winter blew frigid cold across the plains of Armenia. Yet while locals shivered before their fires, legionnaires marched into the maelstrom of icy winds. Theirs was the famous *Legio XII Fulminata*—the Thundering Legion. These elite storm troopers had carried black shields, each emblazoned with a lightning bolt, across the world to form a wall between Rome and invading Persians.

But a more insidious danger faced decaying Rome: the rise of Christianity. So a frightened emperor decreed that his legions sacrifice to the pagan gods. When his orders were delivered to the Thundering Legion, forty legionnaires refused. Their superiors angrily responded, “You alone of all Caesar’s troops defy him. Think of the disgrace you bring upon your legion.” They replied, “To disgrace the name of our Lord Jesus Christ is more terrible still.”

The forty were dragged to flogging posts and beaten with whips. When they didn’t break, they were flayed with hooks. When they still refused to deny Christ, their commanding general ordered them stripped naked and taken onto an ice-covered lake.

On a bitter winter’s day in AD 320, they joyfully stripped off their clothes and ran out onto the ice. Their commander ordered tubs of heated water placed on the banks of the lake to entice them to give up. But the freezing Christians prayed, “Lord, there are forty of us engaged in this battle; grant that forty may be crowned and not one will be missing from this sacred number.”

It seemed that forty would stay true, until one broke from their ranks

and stumbled to shore. Yet when he was eased into the warm bath, the shock caused his body to go into death convulsions. There were only thirty-nine when a sentry, impressed by their bravery, stripped off his uniform and ran naked onto the ice. Again there were forty.

The next morning, the general ordered that their frozen bodies be burned and the ashes scattered on a nearby river. His legionnaires were shocked to find one still alive. His mother, who was among the camp followers, was summoned to convince this solitary survivor to recant. To everyone's surprise, she begged her son to stay true to the end—and he was burned alive with the corpses.

The forty martyrs of Sebaste tell an enduring story of the irresistible power of courage. A pagan legionnaire turned to Christ after one of those Christians came off the ice, then stripped naked to join them. A survivor was willing to be burned to death to keep that number intact. Four years later, Constantine I executed the caesar who had ordered those sacrifices. Sickened by pagan barbarity, and impressed by the faith of martyrs like those at Sebaste, Constantine made Christianity the favored religion of Rome.

Some 2,960 legionnaires followed orders that winter day. But forty did the right thing. Today, you may be tempted to cave in to pressure and violate your conscience. Don't you dare! The forty martyrs of Sebaste teach us that a single act of bravery can even change the course of history.

Courage inspires and ignites a spark of bravery in those watching.



Fear not; you will no longer live in shame.
Don't be afraid; there is no more disgrace for you.

ISAIAH 54:4

Who Killed Superman?



On June 16, 1959, police found George Keefer Brewer dead from a single gunshot wound to the head. cursory evidence pointed to suicide. But the shell casings were in the wrong place, his body was covered with bruises, and witnesses waited for almost an hour to call the police. Many of these witnesses were unsavory characters, each with enough motive to kill him—especially those with Mob connections.

One thing is sure: George was unlucky in both life and death. His hulking good looks got him a part in *Gone with the Wind*, but after that it seemed that he could only get roles in forgettable B films. Then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and he was drafted. That seventeen-month stint in the army all but killed his career. So he took a starring role in a horrible little film, *Superman and the Mole Men*. He was almost laughed out of Hollywood. But the much-panned movie did get him a starring role in a new television series, *Adventures of Superman*. Just about every kid in 1950s America knew the opening line from the announcer: “Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.” George was now a superstar—to children. But he was still a B-list actor when it came to the big screen. Maybe that’s why his life descended into a downward spiral of booze, bad luck, and unsavory friends. The world was shocked when the man with the stage name George Reeves was found shot to death. To this day, people ask, “Who shot the bullet that felled Superman?”

There is another mystery: Did George Reeve’s mysterious death unleash a Superman curse? After Christopher Reeve played the superhero in four films, he was thrown from a horse and paralyzed for life. His costar Marlon Brando’s career took a nosedive after *Superman*; his family

disintegrated, and he ballooned into morbid obesity. Margot Kidder, who played Superman's girlfriend, was partially paralyzed in a car accident. Richard Pryor's life fell apart after he costarred in *Superman III*, and he ended up in a wheelchair. The child who played Superman as a baby ended his life by sniffing air freshener from a can. But none were more cursed by Superman than the original creators of the comic book superhero, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. After being cheated out of the rights to their creation, they spent their lives fighting losing battles in court. They died without receiving any of the billions that their character generated.

Maybe kryptonite exists after all, fatal to anyone who touches this Superman first conceived by the German atheist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, and later embraced by Adolf Hitler as the superior man who needs no God. But no one is faster than a speeding bullet, stronger than a locomotive, or able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. We need a much bigger power, from beyond outer space, to see us through life. You might want to remember these words when you think you are Superman or Superwoman:

Be careful who you trust. The devil was once a super angel.



Those who know your name trust in you, for you,
O LORD, do not abandon those who search for you.

PSALM 9:10

Tamerlane's Curse



Perhaps you think ancient curses unleashed on the modern world are only found in Hollywood movies such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb*. If you think they can't happen in real life, you might want to consider the amazing story of Tamerlane's curse. This fourteenth-century Mongol ruled a vast empire that covered most of modern-day Central Asia, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. He was one of the worst butchers in history, often slaughtering whole people groups. When he was almost seventy years old, this genocidal maniac launched his final campaign, setting out with a massive army to conquer China. No enemy had ever prevailed against him, but a freak winter storm put an end to his unbroken string of victories. Trapped in impassable snowdrifts, Tamerlane died shivering in his blankets as winds and wolves howled around him.

The emperor's body was taken back to Samarkand, where it was embalmed and enclosed in an ornate tomb. These foreboding words were inscribed on the door to the crypt: "When I rise from the dead, the world shall tremble." That's why locals were frightened six hundred years later, when Joseph Stalin sent a team of archaeologists to bring Tamerlane's corpse back to Moscow. Muslim imams begged them not to unleash a curse by entering the tomb. But these were men of science, not superstition. Yet after breaking into the burial chamber, even they shivered at this inscription: "Whoever disturbs my tomb will unleash an invader more terrible than I." Maybe they should have run from that crypt, but they had their orders from the Communist boss of bosses.

Two days after the remains were shipped to Moscow, some 3.6 million German soldiers invaded Russia. Comrade Stalin, who had laughed at Tamerlane's curse, watched helplessly as the Nazi juggernaut rolled across

the Soviet Union. Before the horror ended, twenty-six million Russians died. Surely the curse had come true: the world trembled as it watched Adolf Hitler, a butcher far more terrible than Tamerlane, unleash his invasion on those who opened the fourteenth-century tomb. It's no wonder Stalin sent Tamerlane's corpse back to its violated crypt, where it was reburied in an Islamic ceremony.

Even more amazing: within a month of the tomb being resealed, the tide of war turned at the Battle of Stalingrad. The surrender of the German army on the eastern front began the unraveling of the Third Reich. If he could, the six-hundred-year-old Mongol mummy would have been howling in wicked delight from his burial chamber.

What do you think? Coincidence or curse? At least this much is sure: no one has since dared to disturb Tamerlane's resealed tomb. You can be even more sure of this: God has warned us that curses will be unleashed on those who disobey commands inscribed in his Word. The evidence that they are being unleashed on our world today is too compelling to deny. So, just as we should seek God's blessings, we ought to fear his curses. Fearing God is out of fashion today, but there are some blessings for those who do so:

He who fears God fears nothing else; he who sees God sees nothing else.



It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

HEBREWS 10:31

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.

DEUTERONOMY 14:2, NIV

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.

REVELATION 22:12