

Will Graham hopes ‘Unbroken’ sequel changes lives

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NASHVILLE (BP)—Will Graham can do a convincing impersonation of his late grandfather Billy Graham. But for his role in *Unbroken: Path to Redemption*, Graham received strict orders: Don’t do an impression.

“The director said: Don’t imitate your grandfather,” Graham said. “My grandfather back then preached extremely fast. But the director said: ‘Don’t preach fast. Preach slow and be yourself.’”

Sequel tells the rest of the story

The movie, scheduled to hit theaters Sept. 14, follows the story of Olympian and World War II prisoner Louis Zamperini, who returned home a hero but nearly saw his life and marriage ruined due to PTSD, thoughts of revenge against his captors, and dependency on alcohol.

A visit to the 1949 Billy Graham Crusade in Los Angeles changed Zamperini’s life forever. He accepted Christ, later became an evangelist and founded Victory Boys Camp, an outreach for at-risk youth.

The PG-13 movie is a follow-up to the 2014 release *Unbroken*, which focused on Zamperini’s war heroics. The new movie stars Samuel Hunt of *Chicago Fire* and *Chicago P.D.* as Zamperini and Merritt Patterson of *The Royals* as his wife Cynthia. Will Graham plays Billy Graham.

Matthew Baer, who produced both movies, said he was “blown away” by the similar cadence of Billy Graham’s voice and Will Graham’s voice. The younger Graham, though, said any similarities were not intentional.

“He and I, we sound alike, but he says a few words different than I would,” said Graham, a vice president and associate evangelist for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association who earned his master of divinity from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. “What you’re seeing there is actually not a Billy Graham impersonation. That’s just me.”

Story of redemption and forgiveness

Will Graham grew up hearing about Zamperini’s conversion at the 1949 evangelistic crusade, but it wasn’t until he read the bestselling book by Laura Hillenbrand about Zamperini’s life that he fully appreciated the story’s depth.

“It’s one of the greatest stories of forgiveness outside of the Bible,” Graham said. “Louis received forgiveness, his life was restored, his marriage was restored, his nightmares went away, his drinking went away.”

Just as significantly, Graham added, Zamperini then extended forgiveness to others.

“Louis said he didn’t know if what God did in his life was just a fad or if it really changed him,” Graham said. “And he said he wouldn’t know that until he went back to Tokyo to meet his former captors.”



(Universal Studios / The
WTA Group)

Unbroken: Path to Redemption recreates that key moment in Zamperini’s life when he came face to face with the Japanese men who had tortured him—the men who had hit and whipped Zamperini and the other prisoners regularly.

Hillenbrand's book says Zamperini and the other prisoners were beaten for folding their arms, for cleaning their teeth, for talking in their sleep and for not understanding orders. One "favorite punishment" according to the book, was to force prisoners to do the "Ofuna crouch," which involved standing for hours with knees "bent halfway and arms overhead." Prisoners who stopped or who fell were clubbed and kicked. The beatings are recreated in the 2014 film *Unbroken*.

Mutsuhiro Watanabe—the Japanese corporal nicknamed "the Bird"—singled out Zamperini for his Olympic fame and took a personal satisfaction in torturing him. The Bird beat the prisoners daily, "fracturing their windpipes, rupturing their eardrums, shattering their teeth, tearing one man's ear half off and leaving men unconscious," according to Hillenbrand's book.

Zamperini was a prisoner of war two years.

"Zamperini hated these men—he hated them," Graham said, referencing Zamperini's time without Christ. "But when he stood before them after the war, he said his heart melted in love for them. He said he no longer hated them. And he said, right then he knew what God had done in his life was real. And because of that, he was able to forgive them. ... He formerly wanted to kill these people, and now he wanted to love on them and tell them about Christ and how Christ can change your life."

The Bird never agreed to meet him, so Zamperini mailed him a letter.

L.A. Crusade changed Billy Graham's ministry

The 1949 crusade also was a life-changing event for Billy Graham. Prior to the Los Angeles event, few people in the United States had heard of the

evangelist, who was only 30 and was serving as president of Northwestern Bible College in Minneapolis. Newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst made a decision that would change history by sending a note to editors to “puff” Graham.

“In other words, go write nice things about Billy Graham,” Will Graham said, explaining Hearst’s note. “And so the next day, my granddaddy showed up and there was like 100 reporters. He’s like, ‘I couldn’t get one,’ and now he’s got like 100 of them. He says: What happened? Why are you guys all here? And one of the guys replied to my granddaddy and said: You’ve been kissed by William Randolph Hearst.”

Hearst died two years later and never met Billy Graham. The evangelist never knew why Hearst liked him so much. Nevertheless, it was a “watershed moment,” Billy Graham would say.

“The 1949 crusade is what made Billy Graham famous,” Will Graham said.

[Unbroken: Path to Redemption](#) shows the famous tent that housed the crusade, which originally was scheduled for three weeks and was extended to eight weeks. More than 350,000 people attended. One of those was Zamperini, who was invited by his wife.

Will Graham said he hopes the movie makes an impact on moviegoers in a similar way the crusade affected Zamperini.

“My first and primary reason for doing this is that people would give their life over to Jesus Christ,” Graham said. “There’s going to be a lot more Louis Zamperinis out there. They’re struggling in their marriage. Their marriage is broken, their life’s falling apart. They’re addicted, trying to drown their sorrows away with drugs or alcohol, and they don’t know what to do. I want them to be like Louis.”

It’s also “a great love story,” he added.

“It’s a great story of survival and turning one’s life around, but ultimately it’s about Jesus Christ changing a couple, a husband and a wife,” Graham said. “I hope people see the real story behind it where they’re the Louis, and they can give their life to Christ, too.”

Unbroken: Path to Redemption is rated PG-13 for thematic content and related disturbing images. It contains no coarse language or sexuality.