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Series: Unbroken

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“Resiliency”

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Romans 5:3-5

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

New International Version

Introduction

A number of years ago a member of a former church I led asked me if I had ever heard of Louis Zamperini or had read Laura Hildebrand’s best selling book ***Unbroken*** which describes Zamperini’s World War II experience. He loaned me the book and savoring it for 15 minutes a day, I found it quite a ride. Ever since reading that book, whenever I’ve had to face a situation where I didn’t think I could take it anymore, Zamperini’s story reminded me of the deep resources God plants within each of us. All of us has a resiliency to overcome obstacles on our way to our goals.

Who was Louis Zamperini?

Louis Zamperini grew up in Torrance, California. He started smoking by picking up cigarette butts on the sidewalk...on his way to kindergarten. Louis was basically a juvenile delinquent but running track helped him turn things around in his life. Eventually he ran track at USC and made the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a distance runner.

During World War II Louis was a bombardier, whose plane once got shot up to the tune of 594 bullet holes in one encounter. Then he was in another plane, a rescue plane that itself crashed into the Pacific Ocean. The only survivors were Louis, the pilot Phil, and a tail gunner named Mac. Phil had a wound to his head and it wasn't clear to Louis that he was going to survive. Mac kind of snapped. The only food provisions they had for the three of them, Mac ate all by himself on the first night. They're surrounded every day by sharks that keep bumping into their little raft. They were even attacked at one point, by a great white shark.

Then after they'd been on the ocean for some time, a plane spotted them, and they become euphoric because they thought they'd been spotted, but then it turns out to be an enemy plane and it uses them for target practice. The guys would jump under the raft, into the ocean, to try to evade the bullets. The raft ended up getting 48 bullet holes in it. While he was under the water evading bullets, they would have to push sharks away that were coming after them. Their lips and skin were burned. Their feet were cratered with sores the size of quarters. Their thirst was maddening. Their food deprivation was so severe that Louis lost over 100 pounds. This former Olympic athlete ended up weighing 66 pounds on the raft. That's just the beginning of the book. The Japanese prison camp was another whole nail biting episode in Louis' life.

While I was reading the book I thought it would make a great movie. Then I learned that Universal Studios had actually bought the movie rights to Louis' story way back in the early 1950's and Tony Curtis was selected to play Louis as soon as he finished making Spartacus. But for some reason unknown to most of the public, Universal postponed their plans until now. What a story.

I highly recommend the book Unbroken and Louis' own autobiography *Devil at My Heels*. I wasn't very impressed with the movie Unbroken and I'm looking forward to seeing the 2019 sequel to that movie which tells the story of his conversion to Christ at a Billy Graham rally.

Louis lived quite a life. When he was in his 70's he took up skateboarding and did it well into his 80's. In 2014 Louis was selected to be the 2015 Grand Marshall of the Rose Parade in Pasadena but died July 2 of 2014 at the age of 97. What a life.

As I was reading the book in 2012, I learned he was scheduled to speak at the weekend services of Menlo Church in the Bay Area. I listened to the video of the service there the week before he was scheduled to speak and heard Pastor John Ortberg say that unfortunately Louis Zamperini had had an accident in the last week and broke his leg. His doctor told him that flying from his home in southern California so soon would be too risky. So what do you think he did? Louis and his son drove up to Menlo Park from Hollywood. That's called resiliency.

In a number of weeks we're going to hear that very testimony on video about how after the War, when Louis got home to California, he found his life even more hopelessly lost than when he was at sea. His life got turned around by an encounter with Jesus Christ. I have the actual 1958 testimony Louis gave at a Billy Graham crusade at the Cow Palace in San Francisco nine years after he came to Christ. What a story. Invite your friends to come hear this great story of resiliency. It will lift you up regardless of what challenges you face.

Today we're going to talk about resiliency. How do we have resiliency when everything around us says give up? When you're lost and stranded on the raft, where's God? What is God up to in your life when it looks like your life is over?

This idea that suffering can actually produce growth in character was widely embraced in the ancient world, and thinkers in Greece and Rome would actually write what were called "hardship lists." These were really

difficult experiences that serve to make the wise person stronger and better. Even the Apostle Paul wrote some of these hardship lists in the New Testament. In Romans 5 Paul wrote, *"Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings..." "...because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."*

One night on the raft, an albatross landed on Louis' head. He said they were so skeletal that when they were sleeping the albatross didn't realize they were human beings. This bird lands on his head and wakes him up. It took him about two minutes moving very slowly to catch the bird. They ended up using it mostly for bait because it tasted so bad.

It happened again, and then a third time. By the third time, they were so starved that Louis said, *"We ate the entire bird with gusto. This time it tasted like a hot fudge sundae. I ate the eyeballs and all the rest."*

Phil, the pilot of his downed plane reminded Louis that killing an albatross is supposed to bring bad luck. Now think about their situation for a moment. Their plane has crashed in the Pacific Ocean. They're on a raft. They have no food, no water, no medicine, and no shelter. The Allies couldn't find them. The enemy found them but tried to shoot them. The sharks are trying to eat them. They're dehydrated, blistered skeletons waiting to die, and Phil says, "Hey, killing an albatross might bring bad luck." Louis says, *"What more bad luck could we have?"* He would find out. Stay tuned.

Hardship lists. We all have them to one degree or another. They tend to have a way of revealing and making evident, our character. Think about it. There were three different men on that raft. They all faced the same situation. They were all in the same raft, on the same ocean, with the same odds, but in their minds and their spirits, they respond in different ways. Mac just kind of gives up while Phil and Louis somehow embrace it as a challenge, and they

engage how they think, in their imaginations, and that meant the difference between life and death.

The writer of Proverbs says in 24:10 *"If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength!"* See, part of what trouble does is test our character. The hardship list doesn't have to be nearly as dramatic as drifting on the ocean. Everybody has a hardship list going every day, and we need to trust that God is at work in this, not causing it but building our character.

Proverbs 17:3: *"The crucible for silver..."* In other words, that's where the purity of silver is tested. *"...and the furnace for gold..."* The fire is where gold is tested. *"...but the LORD tests the heart."* God is interested in my heart.

There's a way in which all of life, every day, is kind of a test. How will I respond to an interruption, or not getting what I want, or to a health problem, or to somebody getting in my way, or being disappointed, or getting criticized, or having to wait? Does anybody here ever get impatient? See, trouble can reveal our character.

Trouble can also be an opportunity for the growth of character. John Ortberg writes of talking with a friend about an important decision he faced. The friend said one path will be really hard but one path will be very easy and he was trying to figure out what to do. Ortberg asked him a question: *"Would either path make you a better person?"* His immediate response was, *"The harder path would make me a better person."* Ortberg asked him why. He said, *"Haven't you noticed great comfort rarely brings great growth?"* Trouble, by itself, doesn't produce growth. Trouble can produce bitterness. Trouble can produce all kinds of bad stuff. If I can trust God in it, if I can live with confidence and joy and not get all focused on myself, then God can use trouble to bring growth.

Desperate trouble reveals the truth about the human condition. It's like a stress test and God never stresses us more than we can handle. Louis Zamperini may be the most resourceful guy you have ever read about but even his resourcefulness wouldn't be enough without a little intervention. In

Devil at My Heels, which Louis wrote in his late eighties, he says *"Today, I am licensed, accomplished, or an expert in 84 fields, from skiing to lifeguarding to skydiving to glacier climbing."*

When he was on the raft, at one point, a shark got frustrated and actually leapt out of the water into the raft to attack Louis. Imagine being in a raft and a shark jumping at you out of the water. What would you do? This is what Louis did. He said, *"I thrust both my palms against its nose, which stuck out about a foot past the mouth, and was able to shove the ravenous creature back into the sea."* Do you think he had some help there?

On the raft, maybe the most resourceful guy in the world found that his existence was a gift over which he was not in charge. When the plane crashed, he writes, *"Just to be on the safe side, I thanked God for saving our lives. My buddies prayed with me. Of course, on life rafts, that's what you mostly do. You pray."* *"On the raft, I was like anybody else. From the native who lived thousands of years ago on a remote island to the atheist in a foxhole. When I got to the end of my rope, I looked up."*

The late Dallas Willard, former USC professor and spiritual director used to say, *"God's address is at the end of your rope."* We all have a rope and it has an end. If you haven't gotten there yet, you will get there one day. That's where God is but it's not the only place where God is.

Once, they went six days with no rain. They had no water on the raft, so they were literally dying of thirst. They had nowhere else to turn, so Louis bargains with God. He says, *"God, answer my prayers now. I promise if I get home through all this and whatever is to come, I'll serve you the rest of my life."* Then Louis writes, *"What else could I say? Given our miserable situation, devotion was all we had to offer."* But think about it, what else does anyone ever have to offer God? *"Give me what I want, and I'll give you devotion and \$20."* Maybe devotion is all God wants.

Louis says, *"When you're on the raft, no food, no water, no medicine, no radio, no engine, no bargaining chips, no diplomas, no offices, no desks, no*

promotions, no cash, you become aware of your intense dependence on God. How slender is the thread from which your life hangs."

But what if the view from the life raft is actual reality? We think of the life raft as being kind of strange or abnormal. What if that's actually real? What if self-sufficiency is the great illusion? What if we have so many props that we live with an illusion we're in control? Because when trouble comes...illness, loss, bankruptcy, divorce, fear...when you're on the raft, when you're at the end of your rope (and you do have a rope) that illusion of self-sufficient control gets shattered.

One day, the Word of God came to a church in Laodicea. God said to people in Revelation 3:17, *"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.'" God said, "But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked."* Spiritually, that's all of us in our sin, in our stubborn pride.

The lesson of the raft needs to be I desperately need God, but everything in what we call normal life is designed to make us forget this. Hardships in our life aren't fun but without them we would never realize that we need God. Without feeling and knowing a need for God we would never give our lives over to his Son Jesus Christ. We would never have that life changing encounter with him that gives us hope in life. And without hope we're lost. **So instead of cursing your hardship this week, try saying thank you that God gave you resiliency to overcome it and is building even more resiliency within you through this hardship.** Amen.

Questions for Reflection

Romans 5:3-5

3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Ice Breaker Question for Small Groups

1. Who is the optimist in your family or group? In what ways are they optimistic? What usually happens to them?

Context: The Apostle Paul writing to his church at Rome. Persecution was not an uncommon experience for the early church as it is for many Christians around the world today. Paul was trying to de-mystify suffering in contrast to the culture his Gentile believers came out of where there was unfounded optimism that would often disappoint.

1. To “glory in our sufferings” means to rejoice or be glad to have them. What is the ultimate purpose of a Christian suffering? What does suffering produce?
2. What’s the difference between hope and optimism?
3. Describe perseverance, character and hope.
4. Why does hope not “put us to shame?”
5. Describe a time when you were suffering something uncomfortable. How did you get through it? What did you learn from it?
6. Romans 8:28 “*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*” In what ways might this verse be helpful when you’re suffering? In what ways might it be unhelpful?
7. Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” How could there be such a discrepancy between how the church described it’s situation (“I am rich...need nothing) and God’s view (you’re pitiful, poor, blind and naked)?

Application – how would you apply to your church and life today?

IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO GET STARTED IN FAITH

1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's ideal
Romans 3:23

2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death
Romans 6:23

3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us
Romans 8:5

**4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow
Him to become the master of our life**
Romans 10:13

Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below...

"Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me."