

Menlo Park Presbyterian Church
950 Santa Cruz Avenue, Menlo Park, CA 94025 650-323-8600

Series: Unbroken
Hebrews 11:1

January 22, 2012

“Lessons from Louis”
John Ortberg

John Ortberg: Well good morning everybody. This has just been an amazing weekend, and I'm going to bring out our guest. Louis Zamperini was the subject of the book *Unbroken*. Laura Hillenbrand wrote the book *Seabiscuit*, and she writes that Louis said to her, "I'll be an easier subject than Seabiscuit because I can talk." He can. Laura said she was certain after writing *Seabiscuit* she would never find a subject as fascinating to write about, but she said, "When I had my first conversation with the infectiously effervescent and apparently immortal Louis Zamperini, I changed my mind."

He is a force of nature. He is a track star from USC. He was an Olympic runner. He was a World War II veteran. He crashed into the Pacific Ocean and survived longer on a life raft than anybody ever had. He was a prisoner of war under horrific conditions and then in a very dramatic way gave his life to Jesus Christ and to serve God, inspiring people all around the world, never more than he is right now at the age of 94. There are not many people in life where the word *hero* authentically applies to them, but we get the chance to meet somebody like that today. So would you now greet and honor Louis Zamperini?

Louis Zamperini: My favorite song.

John Ortberg: Your favorite song?

Louis Zamperini: "Amazing Grace," yeah.

John Ortberg: I didn't know that.

Louis Zamperini: Oh yeah, I guess it's everybody's.

John Ortberg: Well yeah. I'm so glad you love it. Welcome here. We're so glad to have you.

Louis Zamperini: Well thank you.

John Ortberg: It's a great honor. Often when Louis speaks at places they will show a video, but we don't show the video here because everybody has been reading about you. How many of you have been reading either *Unbroken* or *Devil at My Heels*? Each week we've been doing a pop quiz, so here is today's pop quiz. Louis was born in New York in 1917. How much did he weigh when he was born? It's in the book. It's in the book, people. Turn to the person next to you and tell them how much Louis weighed. Take a guess if you want to. Louis, how much did you weigh when you were born?

Louis Zamperini: Well I had hair. Hair, skin, and bones, 11 pounds.

John Ortberg: That's a big boy.

Louis Zamperini: Yeah. My top weight is 165, so I'm a little boy.

John Ortberg: Well Laura writes that when you were born, you loved to crash through boundaries and you were untamable. What was life like when you were growing up?

Louis Zamperini: Well my brother and I were dying of double pneumonia, so we were shipped to California immediately. We ended up in Long Beach, and as a 3-year-old kid (I guess I was 3 or 4), I was challenged to a race across the street. I was beaten, and the kid who beat me was hit by a car and killed. That was the first time I realized I felt guilty because I took up the challenge. It took them two hours to find me. I crawled under the house. I just looked out of the vent until they found me. I'd always felt that way when anything happened. I always felt guilty. I don't know what the reason was, but that was my childhood.

John Ortberg: Then you got into quite a bit of trouble when you were a kid. One of my favorite stories is the story about the church bells.

Louis Zamperini: Oh yeah. Yeah, that was one of my classics. Yeah, I found a spool of piano wire, and I climbed the church, tied the wire to the bell. I threw it down to my buddy. He pulled it up in a pepper tree. Then we waited until midnight. I got up in the pepper tree, and I started to ring the bell slowly. Lights went on. People came from all over town. I can remember below me these two women are saying, "Oh, it's a miracle. It's a miracle." The Fire Department wouldn't believe it. They got their ladder out and found the wire, and I had to skiddoo.

John Ortberg: So you would often get in trouble, and then it was really running that changed your life.

Louis Zamperini: Well what was that again?

John Ortberg: You got in a lot of trouble, but it was running that changed your life, when you started to run, to race.

Louis Zamperini: Well yeah, my brother, of course... I have one of the great brothers in the world. He would never give up on me. He was very forceful and yet very gentle in trying to reform me. Finally I got in so much trouble that the police never looked for me anymore. They used to drive in front of my house and park and wait until I got home.

Then my brother got together with the principal of the school. We had a demerit system, 100 demerits. If you lost 25 demerits, you were illegal. You couldn't compete in sports. The chief invited my brother to bring me to the police station to show me two guys in the lock-up. He said, "Louis, those two guys have lost the most precious thing in life: freedom. Someday you're going to end up behind bars." Then my brother tried talking to him about activities. "We have to get him started in sports or something." The chief said, "May I suggest running? We've been chasing him all over town for months."

So then they got me out for track against another school. They had four runners, and I was the only runner from our school. Coming down the home stretch, I was in fourth place. Then I heard the students from my school screaming from the grandstand, "Come on, Louis!" Well this was news to me. I didn't know anybody knew my name. So I did make a little effort. I passed one guy. So I came in third, but it was the recognition that got me started. I just couldn't believe anybody in school knew my name.

So then I had a session with my brother. Here I was a total loss, juvenile delinquent, dissipating at every turn. Yet in a matter of one minute I made up my mind to go the opposite way. I became just as fanatic in training. I wasn't eating sweet stuff. I just set myself a goal. My first lesson, which was a good lesson from my brother... He said, "Well, we're running against Narbonne. Their runner is the best in the league. If you want to beat him, go over and take notes on what he does to train. Then you go back to Torrance and double it." "Well that's a good idea. That's a good way to try it." So I did that and started winning races. I never lost a mile race for five years.

John Ortberg: Then you ended up in the Olympics in 1936. What was it like to go to the Olympics?

Louis Zamperini: Well for me it was unbelievable because I was too young for the Olympics. Yes, I was a high school miler. I had the high school world's record, established 4:21. Now you have Cunningham, Bonthron, and others who are running 4:08, 4:09, 4:10. So I just figured the Olympics in '36 are not for me, but my prime would have been 1940 in Tokyo.

In the meantime, the second best 5,000-meter runner was coming to southern California. My brother wanted me to run against him to see how close I could come to a man who would make the team, not that I would make it. So I entered the race. Three miles, 188 yards. My brother said, "Now when the last lap comes, I'll let you know so you can move out and do the best you can."

Well he miscounted the laps. He had me move out the last half mile. My opponent couldn't stand it. We were jockeying back and forth for the lead. Finally, someone said, "Hey, you have another lap to go." Finally at the last 110 yards I passed him. I pulled away about 15 yards. Now we're lapping a fellow from San Pedro. He is in the first lane.

The officials were so excited about the race they forgot to motion him off the track until I started to pass him. Then they motioned him off the wrong way, so we ran side by side and collided at the grandstand. By the time I got up, my opponent now was heading for the tape. I had to catch him again. He beat me by about an inch. I knew I could beat him.

On the strength of the performance, yes, I got an invitation to New York for the trials. In those days, how do you get there? There was no money. You had to either hitchhike or buy a train ticket. One kid left Seattle in a motorcycle to go to New York to compete. I did get one round-trip on the Southern Pacific Railway because my dad worked for the railway. The merchants of the city of Torrance got me a suitcase and this, that, and the other. Then they took an offering so I'd have spending money so I could eat on the train and have a place to stay in New York. I either made the team or I didn't make it.

Now I'm in New York running in the 5,000 meters. The top man in the country had just broken the world record in the two mile. My brother said, "Just get behind the world's record holder and keep your eyes on the back of his head until the last lap when you make your play." Well I got my eyes on the back of his head, and I was going to pass him more than once. I couldn't do it. I just thought, *You can't pass the world's record holder*. I waited too late.

The last 220 he is ahead of me. Another kid from the same school, his teammate, was in the second lane. Now I'm in the third lane because I want to pass them. Well the last 220, if you're in the third lane you're running about 12 yards further, but I had to do it because I waited too long because he was a world's champion. I finally pulled alongside of his buddy, then passed him. Then on the homestretch I was

probably 10 yards behind, but the last 150 yards I'd say I finally caught up to him. We hit the tape a dead heat. You couldn't put a hair between us.

John Ortberg: So then you went to Germany... Yeah, I think that's worth applause. That's pretty amazing. You went to Germany and stole a Nazi flag. Tell us about that.

Louis Zamperini: Well yeah, a lot happened before I took the flag. I had never been on a ship in my life. Here I am aboard the *SS Manhattan*. The first thing I noticed was the athletes were picking up souvenirs. Of course I was well qualified for that. Then the first meal I couldn't believe the food they bring on a boat. My eyes were just popping out of my head. I forgot all about the Olympics. I made my gold medal eating.

So for about 12 days crossing the Atlantic, I put on about 14, 15 pounds. I couldn't lose it in time for the finals. I was in good shape except I was carrying extra weight, so I couldn't keep up the fast pace that the Finns set. So the last lap, there are seven runners ahead of us about 50 yards. The rest of us who couldn't keep up the pace were 50 yards behind.

Then the last lap... Remember my brother was my coach. I'd complained about the last lap. He said, "Well everybody is tired the last lap. Think of it this way. Isn't one minute of pain worth a lifetime of glory? So just go out and run your guts out." So I sprinted the last lap, and I couldn't believe it. I gained 50 yards on the leaders, and that of course brought the people to their feet. I came in eighth.

On the strength of that, Hitler had sent an officer over. Between Hitler and the U.S. team, all the German officers were filling in the space. His name was Goebbels. "Hitler wants to see you." I thought, *I didn't win a medal*. He said, "He wants to see you." So I went over there. He just took my hand and just said, "The boy with the fast finish." That was it. My brother was right. One minute of pain was a lifetime in glory, and so people are still talking about that last lap.

John Ortberg: Then you joined the military, and World War II broke out. You were on a plane that crashed, and we all read about those 47 days you and Phil and Mac were on the raft in the ocean. How did you survive 47 days on a raft?

Louis Zamperini: Well it's a lifetime of preparation. I was an Eagle Scout. That is survival training. Then I took courses in survival. In Hawaii I was at Kahuku Air Base. They had an announcement in the papers that an expert was going to teach survival in the South Pacific. We had 28,000 troops in Hawaii, and I got there early so I could get a seat. Nobody showed up. Out of 28,000 troops, there were only 15 of us.

This was very fortunate for me because this old-timer's spoke on sharks, the characteristics of the sharks, their nose and how tough they were. That was the first time I knew a shark's liver was 20 percent of the shark and how tough they were. In fact, the only part of the shark you could eat raw was the liver. The meat you could eat it if you had cooked it. Otherwise, it smells something like ammonia.

So this was very important for me to have that training. So we got on the raft. I knew exactly what to do. So even with the condition of the world today I'm still in survival. I have stuff around the house stashed away for the big one.

John Ortberg: In your book and in *Unbroken* it talks about being on the raft in the doldrums when everything was still and beautiful. What was that like?

Louis Zamperini: Well, people said the life raft was supposed to have been the most horrible thing that ever happened to me. It was, but then I saw things that just took my breath away. One was we saw a big wave far away, a rogue wave coming toward us. Boy, were we scared. We thought, *Man, when that hits us where are we going to end up?*

When the wave got closer and closer, it turned out to be about 100 to 200 porpoises. They went right through us. Then we looked in the water, and we were in a school of millions of little minnows. The life raft was inadequate. If we'd have had a net, like a butterfly net, we could have caught all the fish in the water, but we didn't have that. So that was a sight that... How many people have seen a sight like that?

The other sight that really gripped me was we were in the complete doldrums. The water was motionless. It was just solid still, and it was so smooth it was like a mirror. You really thought you could get out and walk on it. I remember a little minnow jumped out of the water about 50 yards away, and we could hear it. This was a real thrill and a treat very few people in the world would experience. Yeah, there were moments like that when we had beautiful sunrises, sunsets. Actually our pastime was watching albatross gliding over the raft. So that was our entertainment.

John Ortberg: So you survived the raft, and reading the book it felt like if you can just get off the raft, things would be okay. They would get better. But they didn't get better. You end up a prisoner of war. Tell us about what was it like to be a prisoner of war.

Louis Zamperini: Well first of all, of course Mac died finally. To me hope is the power of the soul to endure. So we had all this hope to endure until we were rescued or something. Then on the twenty-seventh day a Japanese bomber flew over, and they strafed us with two machine guns for about 30 or 35 minutes. We're in a small space, and in that small space there were 48 bullet holes. We were missed by a fraction of an inch here, there, and everywhere. It was just hard to believe.

So now we had hope up to this moment. *"Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."* So now our hope turned to faith because we had something to figure on. We figured the plane imitated our B-25 speed. Take off in the morning at 7:00 for a mission. They had a half hour to kill over the target, and they're going to run out of fuel. With simple calculations we were able to detect that there were islands within so many days. Yes, we picked the right day. We would see land on the forty-seventh day. So hope was one thing; faith is another.

Sure enough we drifted into the Marshall Islands, and then a big storm came up. It was unbelievable. The storm was so vicious a ship would have sunk in it. We were fortunate to be in a raft. So we had water come into the raft. We'd leave it in there to have a little center of gravity. Then we kept low in the raft so we wouldn't be thrown out. Finally we survived that all night, and the next day we're in big swells up and down.

We see the island. We're making for the island, and everything seemed deserted. We saw one island where natives had to live because there were huts, fruit trees, bananas, whatever. We thought, *We have to get ashore. We could survive there.* Then a patrol boat was coming around. It saw us, picked us up. We're taken to the island of Wotje, and I went from 165 pounds down to 65 pounds. So I lost a lot of weight. We couldn't walk, so the Japanese had to carry us over their shoulders.

Overnight there, and then they said, "Tomorrow you will be placed aboard a steamer and go to another island called Kwajalein. That was known in the South Pacific as *Execution Island*, so all your prisoners

are sent there for execution. So that's where I ended up, for the next 43 days on Kwajalein. That was just the most unbearable thing of my life.

I'd say the most disappointing part of being on Kwajalein was the Japanese interrogation panel, six officers just in white uniforms with gold braid. They're sitting around this beautiful white table full of soda pop and pastries and goodies. They're smoking cigarettes, blowing the smoke in our faces. They won't offer you anything unless you answer their question properly.

Now out of these six officers, one of them shocked me. He said, "Lieutenant Zamperini, when you were entering USC in the fall of '36, I had just graduated." Out of the six officers, he was by far the most obnoxious of the six. It was hard for me to believe he was a Trojan. At USC we do believe in excellence in education, excellence in sports, and excellence in morale. Here this guy is the most obnoxious of the six. I finally came to the conclusion he had to be a third-year transfer from UCLA. (I don't really mean that.)

So 43 days out in this dungeon. Of course we were used as guinea pigs on injections. So much happened. We're in a small cell about 28 inches wide. Filthy, flies, mosquitoes. The only relief we had was getting ill. We got dengue fever. That really helped us to get along a little better. Then we're injected three times with whatever it was that almost killed us.

Then finally they set our day of execution, but an officer from another division on the island who followed the Olympics and followed sports in America knew all about me. He came over and suggested to the panel that rather than execution to send me on to Tokyo to make radio broadcasts (meaning propaganda) because there was a lot of publicity in being missing in action. So they accepted that.

So I ended up in Tokyo. They put me in a private interrogation camp unregistered by the Red Cross or anyone else. That camp is where the high-profile prisoners go. In other words, like Pappy Boyington was shot down Friday. He was there Saturday. Well I'm there almost a year, and I asked the head interrogator, "Why am I here? I'm not high profile. Forty-seven days on a raft. Forty-three days in the dungeon. A month getting to Yokohama. I'm obsolete."

A year and a month after I'm there, I'm transferred to headquarters. The reason was it takes a year and a month to be declared dead officially. So when the American authorities declared me dead, then they transferred me. The idea was to fulfill their plan for me, and that was to make the radio broadcasts. So sure enough they invited me to Radio Tokyo to broadcast to my parents. They had me write my script. I wrote what I wanted, and I delivered it the way I wanted. Then I go back to the prison camp.

They came in two weeks later and said, "Oh, you have beautiful radio voice. Want you to make more broadcasts." So I thought, *Hey great*. But this time it's the start of propaganda. They wrote the script. I read it. I said, "There is no way I can read this on the radio." "You must." Boy, they were all over me, and I just absolutely refused.

So they went into another room to have a conference. In the meantime I was able to steal a copy, which is in the book. They came back out and said, "Because you refused, you will go to punishment camp," meaning slave labor. Of course they knew how much I hated The Bird. I complained about him. So I have no qualms about going to a slave labor camp just to get away from The Bird.

When I go back to camp, a week later The Bird is transferred. Now there are 101 camps in Japan proper. What are the chances of him and me ending up in the same camp again? This was all planned. So he is transferred. Then a week later I'm transferred. I'm on a train for 12 hours, come into this camp, 10 feet of snow. I'm told to face the guard's shack until further orders. I stood here for about 10 or 15 minutes freezing. The door opens, and out steps The Bird. I tell you my knees buckled, and I thought, *It's useless. You can't get rid of the guy.* So I spent the remainder of the war at Camp 4-B, and we lost about 80 prisoners in one winter. It was brutal.

John Ortberg: Louis, when the war was finally over, you went back to America. Then things got hard for you inside. The nightmares and the anger. Tell us about that.

Louis Zamperini: Well the nightmares started when I met The Bird. Actually my last year in prison camp it was nightmarish. At night I was always strangling The Bird. So it was set up in prison, and it just got worse and worse. I came home. Now we know what it was: post-traumatic stress disorder. They didn't know what it was in those days. I came home, and everybody welcomed me home, parties. I had a great time, but I still had nightmares at night. I'm always strangling The Bird.

Finally I met the girl of my dreams, got married. She knew I had a problem. So we went to the V.A., but they didn't know what it was all about. I kept having worse and worse nightmares. So one night I had The Bird by the throat. I woke up in a cold sweat, and I had my wife by the throat. This really was scary. I didn't know what to do.

Then a young couple had come to us and said, "A young evangelist is coming to L.A. next week, a fellow named Billy Graham. We want you to come with us. We'll take you down to hear him." Well I wanted no part of it, but my wife did go. Now in the meantime she had already filed for divorce because of our situation. I became an alcoholic. I couldn't function properly. She went down, came back speaking of a peace and joy in her heart she had received when she received Christ as her Savior. Then she was all over me about going to the meetings. I kept refusing, refusing.

Then she said, "Because of my conversion, I'm not going to get a divorce." Well that was good news. So I did go, and when Billy started to preach I grabbed my wife and I said, "We're out of here." I pulled her on home, and I said, "I don't want to ever go back to a place like that again." She reminded me she wasn't going to get a divorce because of *her* conversion, so back we went.

Then near the end of Billy's sermon he mentioned that when people come to the end of their rope and there is nowhere else to turn, they turn to God. Of course that's what happened on the life raft and prison camp. You make promises to God. I remember the thousands of promises I made on the raft and in prison camp. God kept his promise. I came home alive. I didn't keep my promise. That really shamed me, and I couldn't leave that night.

I went back to a prayer room and made a confession of my faith in Christ. I didn't really know what it was all about until they explained it to me. I got on my knees and made my confession of faith, and I couldn't believe what was happening to me there. I knew as I was on my knees I was through getting drunk. I knew I had forgiven all my guards, including The Bird. It was just unbelievable. That was a genuine miracle conversion that happened in a matter of...how much time? When you say, "I believe." That's it.

The next miracle was the next morning I got up and grabbed my New Testament that was given to us in the service. Nobody in the service could understand it, and I couldn't understand it. So we threw it in our

footlockers. Well I got that out, walked about four blocks away to the park, and sat down and started to read. That was the second miracle because now I understood what it was all about.

John Ortberg: There is a quote from *Unbroken* when you went to the park. It was Barnsdall Park.

Louis Zamperini: That's it.

John Ortberg: This is what Laura writes: "He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man that The Bird had striven to make of him. In a single silent moment his rage, fear, humiliation, and helplessness had fallen away. That morning he believed he was a new creation."

Louis Zamperini: Absolutely.

John Ortberg: We have actually a picture of Louis with Billy Graham back in the 1940s when that happened and then a picture of the two of them now. Isn't it just beautiful to see a life spent with God? We wanted to just give a moment to everybody here to respond to God if that would help you. So would you bow your heads for a moment and close your eyes?

It may be you simply want to remember about or reflect on what Louis has said, but it may be you're kind of like Louis was where you're searching and wandering and hungering for God. God is here right now. You can do just what Louis did a long time ago. You could say, "God, I want to confess my own anger or brokenness, sin. I want to ask you to forgive me through what Jesus did when he died on that cross in my place. I want to have Jesus as the forgiver and the leader of my life. So I'm turning my life over to you now."

Then we thought since Louis is here today, again as you just keep your heads bowed for a moment, if you have made that decision, turned your life over to Christ as Louis did, and you'd like Louis to pray for you, would you just slip your hand up? For nobody else to see, just for Louis to see as he looks out here. You have made that decision. Man, God bless you. God bless you. Wow.

Then for anybody else, Louis has walked with God for a long time. If you're here today and you would like to have Louis bless you and pray for you right now. It might just be, "I'm troubled," or, "I'm anxious," or maybe, "There is somebody I haven't forgiven," and carrying that burden. If you'd just like to have Louis pray for you and bless you for any reason, would you slip your hand up right now so Louis can see? So Louis you see all these hands. Louis, would you pray a prayer of blessing for us right now?

Louis Zamperini: Okay. Lord, we thank you for this church service this morning. We thank thee that you are here in the name of Jesus Christ. There are those here this morning who fit my position when I went to hear Billy Graham. I was uncertain. I said, "What was going to take place until I got on my knees and confessed my faith in Jesus Christ?" Then faith began to happen. I thank thee, Lord, that you have led and guided me. It hasn't all been easy, but I've learned my lessons as I went along and began to grow in the Lord Jesus Christ and began to understand more and more what your purpose in our lives was.

So God I pray for these who are coming to thee this evening, or those who are confused and don't know what to do. Those who are in Jesus Christ are new creations. That's exactly what salvation is. We're new creatures in Christ Jesus. So we ask thy blessings upon these and pray it's just not a temporary thing, that they would make the confession of their faith and take it with them when they leave the church. In Jesus' name.

John Ortberg: Amen. If you have made that decision or if there is just any way as a church we can help you to grow spiritually, we'd love to do that. Some of us will be around up here in the front afterward. You can email or call our church, and we'd love to serve you in that way. Now you're a national treasure, and we are so grateful you would come and spend this time with us. Can we all thank Louis Zamperini for this?

Louis Zamperini: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

John Ortberg: Thank you. I just find myself thinking, *I want to be like that when I grow up, have that spirit.* God wants that spirit for every one of us. So now may the God who was with Louis Zamperini on a raft and with Louis in a prison and with Louis when his life hit bottom, may that God be with you also. God loves you so much. We're going to learn how much next week. We finish this series with *Broken: The Final Lesson*. So we'll see you then. Have a great week with God. Amen.