

**Irvington Presbyterian Church**

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Series: Unbroken

January 25, 2015

**“The Healing of Our Wounds: Forgiveness”**

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Ephesians 6:12

*12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

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.*

All Scripture verses in this message are taken from Today's New International Version TNIV

**Introduction – Prison Camp**

For the past two weeks we've been looking at the story of former Olympic runner turned World War II Navy bombardier Louis Zamperini as told in the bestselling book *Unbroken*. As we have seen, it was during a rescue effort that his bomber crashed into the Pacific where he and two other crew men found themselves floating on two small rafts. Eventually one of the rafts sank and one of the crew members died. Altogether Louis was on a raft for 47 days with little or no supplies until they were “rescued” by a hostile Japanese military.

As prisoners of the Japanese military, Louis and Phil along with all the other prisoners were tortured, humiliated and routinely beaten. They were subject to medical experiments, forced into slave labor and constantly starved. When they were given food, often it was indescribably awful.

Prisoners were forced into labor until they started to drop. A particularly cruel form of punishment was for one of the guards to have all the enlisted prisoners

hit their own officers in the face as hard as they could. If they didn't hit them hard enough, guards would club them. In one two hour period, all the officers, including Louis, got hit in the face by their own men about 220 times.

Conditions were so brutal that of the 34,000 prisoners of war in Japan, more than 37 percent died there, far more brutal than any of the other nations involved in World War II.

Prisoners sometimes fought back, sometimes in very creative ways. One example was a group of Scottish prisoners who were not only being starved; they were forced to load food on boats so that the enemy soldiers who were starving them would be able to eat in abundance.

So to fight back, Louis writes that these starving Scotsmen would drink excessive amounts of tea on the job. The enemy couldn't figure out why the Scots loved Japanese tea so much. Louis writes, *"It was actually an elegantly simple form of sabotage. The Scots would drink tea all day, then take turns urinating on the rice, so that by the time it reached its destination, it had spoiled."*

For Louis, his darkest moments involved a guard they nicknamed "The Bird." Louis says of the Bird *"He would beat POWs every day, fracturing their windpipes, rupturing their eardrums, shattering their teeth, tearing one man's ear half off, and leaving them unconscious. He combined physical with emotional torture. He wanted to humiliate, to destroy a prisoner's sense of humanity."*

### **A Resiliency to Deal with Evil**

Louis would have to deal with the anger that naturally developed as a result of his experiences as a prisoner. What do you do when you're hurt, angry, and bitter? Where is God? How can we live an unbroken life in a world with evil that just won't go away? But deep within us, God has developed a capacity within us to deal with anger. It is a resiliency to forgive that we don't even know exists until it's tested.

Before we discover that resiliency, we have to remember evil exists and it's everywhere. You alone are not its only target. The apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians

6:12 *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* Evil is real. What that means is when we talk about anger or sin, we're not talking about problems human beings can solve easily.

When we think of Louis, it wasn't fair that the meanest guard in the meanest military, the Bird, hated him the most. The first time Bird met him he beat him for not looking him in the eye, and then beat him for looking him in the eye. He illegally kept him from being registered as a POW with the Red Cross so his family couldn't know he wasn't dead. He was assigned to clean up the pigsty, forced to use his bare hands with the filth, and eat slop for a pig to stay alive. On top of it the Bird beat Louis every day and tried to humiliate and de-humanize him.

### **God Cares Through People**

Recognizing that sins exist everywhere in this world, we also have to recognize that God cares about what happens to us and about how God shows that care. Even in the prison camp, God was there for Louis and will be for you in your prison experience.

A guard came up to Louis, knocked on the door, and said, "Are you a Christian?" Louis said, "Yeah." He wasn't sure what to say since he hadn't been to church since he was a kid. The last time he had been to church, he had gotten there late and a priest walked over to him, twisted his ear, and sent him home to get a note from his mom to explain why he came late. He never went back. They apparently handled coming late to church differently back in that day than we do in our day.

Louis told the guard, "Yeah, I'm a Christian." The guard Kawamura said, "I'm a Christian too," and he gave Louis a pencil and paper so they could communicate. He began to give him food out of his own supply.

One day another guard came to the cell, and rammed a stick through the door window into Louis's face like he was trying to poke out his eye. The next day, Kawamura saw Louis's bloody face and asked him what happened. When Louis told him, he just lifted his arm and pointed to his bicep. A couple days later,

Kawamura came back and pointed out the door so Louis could see that vicious guard, who had now been bandaged around his mouth and his head because Kawamura had taken care of his little friend Louis.

Later on, a private named Yukichi Kano also a Christian, risked his life to sneak charcoal for men to heat their room, or give them blankets to keep them warm, or get them medical help so they could stay alive. Kano risked his own life to do that for them. Pappy Boyington, another remarkable friend of Louis' who got the Medal of Honor, wrote, *"There was a way braver man than I in that camp,"* and he named this Japanese private, Kano.

These were men who were literally obeying Jesus' command, "Love your enemies..." Just think you might be God's instrument of care for someone going through a difficult time. Think about that when you have a chance to do an act of kindness.

### **Time Alone Doesn't Heal All Wounds**

As good as that help was, Louis would still have to deal with the anger building within him. We know now that time isn't a guaranteed healer of all wounds but God is the one who can heal wounds. Louis' suffering was so intense years later, after he was out of prison and back home, he began to experience flashbacks, and he'd have nightmares every night about "The Bird." He had one dream where in the dream he was finally able to attack "the Bird." When he woke up, he realized he was in his own bed, choking his pregnant wife.

He suffered from what we would now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. His method of managing it involved alcohol. But Louis heard a young preacher named Billy Graham preaching on John 3:16: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

It took Louis awhile, but he eventually surrendered his life to Jesus. When he went home it was to a house full of wine, champagne, even a 300-year-old bottle of incredibly expensive cognac, and he knew what God was calling him to do. He took the wine and poured it down the drain. He took the champagne and poured

it down the drain. He took the cognac and returned it for a whole lot of money. Then he went to bed and never had another nightmare about "the Bird."

I have to admit, that is a highly unusual and an amazingly quick recovery but with God all things are possible. He said, *"It's as if the doctor had cut the hating part of my brain away."* God can do that. Deep within us God has planted the capacity to forgive that we don't know we have because it's covered up with years of abuse. But as Paul discovered *"...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"* To unleash that capacity to forgive, we need Christ living his life through us and then to take some steps of faith to do things we didn't think we could do.

For Louis one of those things was to return to Japan. Louis was quoted in Time Magazine after the war, *"I'd rather be dead than return to that country. I couldn't stand Japan."* Then one day, he heard Bob Pierce, founder of the Christian relief agency World Vision. Pierce used to pray, *"Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God."* Bob said, *"You know, there's a great need for Jesus Christ in Japan."* He told this crowd, *"Some of you ought to go back to Japan and bring Christ there."*

Louis suddenly found himself convicted that God wanted him to go back to Japan. But understandably he didn't want to go there. He prayed, *"Being a new Christian, Lord, I will need a good, swift, kick in the pants to understand if this is your will for me."*

On the way to his room at that conference, he got in a conversation with a young minister named Eric Folsom, and Eric said, *"Did you hear what Bob Pierce said about some people needing to go to Japan?"* Louis said, *"Yeah."* Eric said, *"I just have this feeling you ought to go. In fact, Louis, God has burdened my heart to give you \$500 to start you on your way to Japan."* Louis wrote, *"I didn't know whether to hug him or hit him."* Then a singing group who had heard Bob Pierce's talk came up and said, *"We want to give you our tithe money so God can send you to Japan."* So Louis went to Japan to the people and the place he hated.

In Tokyo, a missionary couple passed a message on from a former soldier, who said to them, *"I was one of those who beat Zamperini and broke his nose. Do you think he has really forgiven me?"* Louis wrote a note saying, *"I have,"* but as he did, he thought, *"You know, it's easy to write. Could I actually say it face to face?"*

He ended up at what was called Camp Sugamo. It had housed every single one of the 850 war criminals in Japan including Louis. So here was Louis preaching the good news of Jesus, to these same men who had beaten him and others like them. He said, *"I gave my usual talk, but never with more conviction, about Jesus Christ, his death on the cross for sinners, his resurrection. When I came to the part about how I had been treated in Japanese prison camps, I thought about tempering the details and emotions, so as not to appear too angry, but I didn't, because otherwise my forgiveness would lack true meaning." "I thought this is so profound about how forgiveness is often a long journey, and it will always mean I will have to look at parts of me I didn't think I would have to look at." "It will always take courageous honesty. It is different than excusing. Forgiveness means truth about the wrongs done, coming to grips with how I have distorted stuff, as well as other people, because repentance and reconciliation, if they can happen at all, can only happen based on truth."*

So Louis went and told them the truth, and told them the gospel, and said, *"Does anybody want to receive Christ?"* He was stunned at how many hands were raised. Then the commander said, *"Those of you who were Louis' guards and heads of prison camps, he'd like to speak to you personally. You may come forward if you wish."*

Imagine this moment. These people come forward. Louis sees them, numbers of them whom he's named in this book, who cursed him, beat him, starved him, and humiliated him. He felt something he never expected. He actually felt compassion and love. What a gift from God. He leapt off the stage and down into the crowd. He started going up to these guards and embracing them and loving them. He was forgiving them. Only God could activate that kind of change and resiliency in someone. This is what Jesus brings.

One of the guards, James Sasaki who decided that day to become a Christian said, *"I don't understand how you can forgive us. Your Christianity must be real, but I don't understand it."* Louis said, *"It is real, and if you continue in your faith, one day you will understand."* For a whole bunch of people, that was their liberation day.

I think God wants us to become a community where lingering resentment, and gossip, and talking behind somebody else's back and violating Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18:15, *"If you have something against another person, you go to them in person, and speak to them to try to win them back..."*

But what about the Bird? What about the worst person to ever hurt you? For years after the war the Bird was a war criminal who lived in hiding. The Americans and the Japanese were searching for him. Even his mother thought he was dead. But eventually the American occupation of Japan ended and war criminals from WWII were forgotten. Eventually the Bird resurfaced. Amazingly, as a sign that God was at work in his life, Louis reached out to him in a letter and offered to come to Japan and meet with him. The Bird refused the offer. He wasn't sorry for anything he had done.

We'd all like to think that when we finally put our anger aside and muster the energy to confront the one who hurt us that the other person would apologize. But we know that's not going to always happen. When it doesn't happen, it's like even more fuel poured on our fire. But Louis did the right thing in reaching out. A sign that we're being repaired and not just broken is when we can make the effort to reach out to the person who hurt us as long as we're safe. Our emotional well being is not dependent upon the response of the other person.

## **Conclusion**

Think about whom you need to reconcile with? Where does your heart need to forgive? What's God calling you to do right now? Where have you gotten cold? Where have you just decided you're going to hold something against someone and put them in the category of somebody I don't have to love? I'm going to have

a hardened heart. I'm going to have a bad attitude. I'm going to have an unforgiving spirit. I choose to do that.

Where do you need to say, "O God, forgive me. O God, help me. O God, I'm the one in prison"? Maybe it involves a spouse, or an ex-spouse. Maybe it's somebody in your family. Maybe it's somebody who hurt you badly. Maybe you don't even know what to do yet, and that's all right. God will show you as you're ready.

Will you say right now, "God, I want to surrender my heart; I want to confess my unforgiving spirit"? Then will you take Jesus seriously, and will you go? Will you stop making excuses? Will you stop letting yourself off the hook? Will you make the call? Will you schedule the time together? Will you confess what needs to get confessed? Will you honor Jesus Christ by having the ministry of reconciliation in your life?

### **Next Week**

What happened after the war for Louis Zamperini? The book *Unbroken* and the Angelina Jolie directed film *Unbroken* didn't spend much time on that subject. Forty seven days on a raft and months of beatings in a Japanese prison camp didn't break Louis Zamperini immediately. As humans we have a tremendous amount of resilience to overcome adversity. But adversity takes its toll.

Next week we're going beyond the movie *Unbroken* into Louis' days after the war. We'll hear Louis speaking at the 1958 Billy Graham crusade at the Cow Palace, nine years after he gave his life to Christ. He'll talk about what led to his decision to give his life to Christ, after he finally realized he wasn't unbroken and what had happened in the last nine years.

Billy Graham had him share his testimony because sceptics in the 1950's were saying that people who gave their lives to Christ at Graham crusades were just faking it and not really becoming followers of Christ. What happened to Louis after the war is the real reason we exist as a church. We live in a broken world that badly needs a Savior. That Savior is Jesus Christ. It's a fascinating story.



## Questions for Reflection

Ephesians 6:12

*12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

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.*

### Ice Breaker Question for Small Groups

1. What is one thing that is difficult for you to forget and/or put behind you?

**Context:** The Apostle Paul writing to his church at Ephesus and his church in Italy. With persecution of the church everywhere for these early Christians it was easy to get discouraged. It was also easy to blame the Jews, the Gentile governments and nearly anyone who made their life difficult.

1. What do you think Paul meant when he said “our struggle is not against flesh and blood?” How might that statement be helpful in overcoming anger toward those who have hurt us?
2. What are the “powers of this dark world” and “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms?” Have you ever experienced spiritual forces of evil? How do you imagine that to be like?
3. What is the context of Romans 8:28?
4. How might Romans 8:28 be understood by refugees of Syria. Notice that Paul doesn’t say all things work out for those who love God just that God works for their good. How have your experiences coincided with that?
5. How could Louis return to Japan and speak to his former prison guards after all they had done to him? What specifically happened to his anger? How does your anger typically recede?
6. What can be done when the person who hurt you won’t acknowledge what they have done or are glad that they did it?

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

## **TO LEARN MORE**

**Join a Small Group – call the church office for times and location  
510/657-3133**

**To learn and encourage one another**

### **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."*