



Resilience in Life and Faith

Finding your strength in God



Tony Horsfall and Debbie Hawker

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1

Introduction

Resilience has become a buzzword that is used frequently in everyday life. We hear about it on the news, and there are many workshops and conferences on this topic. But what does it mean, and how can we become more resilient?

Many disciplines, such as physics and mathematics, refer to resilience. When referring to humans, resilience is often thought of as ‘bouncing back’, that is, positive adaptation after adversity. UNICEF defines resilience as ‘the ability to anticipate, withstand and bounce back from external pressures and shocks’.¹ This is a useful description in some cases, but not where people do not feel like they are ‘bouncing’ as they wrestle with challenges, and they may not end back where they started.

Neenan and Dryden state:

Being resilient does not restore the status quo in your life – springing back to the way it was – but, rather, what you have learned from tackling the adversity changes you for the better and helps you become more keenly aware of what is important in your life.²

Timmins has defined resilience as ‘the ability to make the best of any situation’,³ and Barrett and Martin say resilience is ‘the capacity to deal well with pressure’.⁴ Carr offers a specifically Christian description of resilience:

Resilience is having strength to fulfil the call God has given us, even when it will be painful and difficult. Resilience is staying fixed on a higher purpose, motivated by love of God, our neighbour, and the world, and supported by friends. While others let us down, we are carried by the one who called us.⁵

Take your pick from any of these definitions, as each of these has a use in some situations. It is important to remember that resilience is not static, something that we have a certain amount of for life. Our resilience can be depleted, but it can also be maintained, developed and enhanced.

Our aim in this book is to illustrate ways in which you can become more resilient yourself and help the children and adults you care about to also increase their resilience. We will illustrate different components of resilience that have been identified by research. We want to acknowledge the research that others have done and so we have included notes at the end of the book highlighting the literature that has influenced our thinking.

In this book we present our model, which we refer to as the SPECS model of resilience. SPECS stands for the following domains:

- Spiritual
- Physical
- Emotional
- Cognitive and creative
- Social and systemic

The word ‘specs’ is short for ‘spectacles’. Those of us who are very short-sighted know that without our glasses we are far from resilient. When we cannot see what is happening around us, we feel vulnerable and ineffective. We need our specs to help us see clearly and act confidently. Similarly, we need the SPECS components of resilience in order to use our full potential and to see what to do about challenging situations. These SPECS provide clarity and

help us move around our world without crashing down. To build maximum resilience, we should establish the building blocks of resilience in all five of these domains.

We will discuss each of these components of resilience by first drawing on research on this area, and then providing a biblical example of some of the factors that have been identified. It can be difficult to separate out the physical, spiritual, emotional, cognitive and social aspects of life, as there is a lot of overlap, and we are integrated beings. Bible characters do not each illustrate just one of these aspects, but several. Nevertheless, we will try to highlight these different factors to gain extra insights into different facets of resilience. Each chapter ends with some questions, which can be used for group discussions or considered individually.

Oates outlines the resilience we might look for in someone (a man, in this case) going to work outside their own culture:

He should have the stamina of an Olympic runner, the mental agility of an Einstein, the conversational skill of a professor of languages, the detachment of a judge, the tact of a diplomat, and the perseverance of an Egyptian pyramid builder... He should also have a feeling for his culture; his moral judgment should not be too rigid; he should be able to merge with the local environment with a chameleon-like ease; and he should show no signs of prejudice.⁶

Such a person sounds resilient, but this also seems like an absurd picture of excellence, and that is not what we are aiming for. Instead, as you read and think about this material, we urge you to allow space for God's grace. It is easy to see weakness in ourselves or others. We are in good company, as the Bible is full of people whom God used despite their weaknesses. We will meet some of these along the way. Sometimes the people we think are feeble turn out to be the most resilient. As the Bible tells us, 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world

to shame the strong' (1 Corinthians 1:27). We should never write anyone off as being weak, because God is able to give anyone the strength they need to be resilient. We can enhance our resilience and release our potential.

You might wish to assess your current resilience as you begin reading this book. If so, use the rating scale in Appendix A, which encompasses the material covered in this book. This is not a research instrument, but it may help you to identify your strengths and weaknesses when it comes to resilience. Which seem to be your weaker areas? You might find these chapters especially helpful to study.

We will discuss the areas rated in the scale throughout the book and then return to the scale in the final chapter. If you put into practice the recommendations in this book, your resilience rating may increase by the time we return to the questionnaire.

Questions

- 1 Which definition of resilience do you prefer, and why?
- 2 Think about the timeline of your life. What have been the times when you have been most resilient (coping despite adversity, or making the best of difficult situations)?
- 3 What helps you to be resilient and to thrive in life?
- 4 Who is the most resilient person you know or have heard of? What do you think makes them resilient?
- 5 What Bible verses can you think of about resilience?

2

Spiritual aspects of resilience

A number of the key aspects of resilience can be grouped together as 'spiritual factors'. These include a sense of meaning; a sense of calling; hope and beliefs; forgiveness; gratitude; times of sabbath, stillness and silence; being part of a community who share a similar ethos; faith; and prayer and other spiritual disciplines.

Sense of meaning

The Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl was imprisoned in concentration camps during World War II. He watched some fellow inmates succumb to 'giveupitis'. Without purpose, they had no reason to live, and they gave up and died. Other inmates, however, held on to a sense of purpose even in the most inhumane conditions. Frankl refused to give up, because he held on to a desire to be reunited with his wife. He noticed that the prisoners who cared for those around them, even sharing their morsels of food, seemed to survive longest. Frankl concluded that people could find meaning and a reason to live even in a concentration camp, and that this helped them to carry on. After his release he wrote a book entitled *Man's Search for Meaning*.⁷ Frankl also established logotherapy, or 'meaning therapy', which focuses on helping people find meaning in their lives, whatever their circumstances.

People may be more prepared to endure hardship and suffering if they feel that what they are doing is worthwhile. This may be one reason why some people can endure persecution, torture or even martyrdom.⁸ In contrast, people who lose their sense of purpose and become disillusioned are at risk of depression, burnout and even suicide.

Being outwardly focused and helping others can provide a sense of purpose and increase resilience.⁹ Being generous to others is satisfying – as the apostle Paul said, quoting Jesus, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35).

Sense of calling

Some health professionals, teachers, carers and people who work in the emergency services or other vocational jobs say that they are doing what they were born to do. Some parents feel the same way about raising children. Church leaders, missionaries and others in ministry can cope with difficulties without giving up, if they believe that they are doing what they were ‘called’ to do – that is, doing what they are meant to do with their lives. Believing that we are doing what God wants us to do can help us to persevere when the going gets tough. One woman whose husband was kidnapped while they were abroad told me, ‘I know we were meant to be there.’ Believing that it was right to be in that place helped her to cope without feeling guilty about travelling to a dangerous place, or blaming the organisation they belonged to.

A calling is not always to a particular job or place. It may be a calling to a certain lifestyle, such as living simply, buying ethically, having a low carbon footprint or being hospitable. Or it may be a calling to social action. For example, Revd Daniel Woodhouse and Sam Walton felt a calling to protest the fact that Britain sold fighter jets to Saudi Arabia. In 2017, these peace activists were arrested and taken to court for breaking into an airbase to protest because these war

planes were being used to bomb civilians in Yemen. They were later acquitted after arguing in court that they were acting for the greater good.

Having a sense of what we are called to do can also help us to say 'No' to things that we don't feel called to do, and so avoid exhaustion. Henri Nouwen put it this way:

You are very concerned with making the right choices about your work. You have so many options that you are constantly overwhelmed by the question, 'What should I do and what should I not do?' You are asked to respond to many concrete needs. There are people to visit, people to receive, people to simply be with. There are issues that beg for attention, books it seems important to read, and works of art to be seen. But what of all this truly deserves your time?...

Try to give your agenda to God. Keep saying, 'Your will be done, not mine.' Give every part of your heart and your time to God and let God tell you what to do, where to go, when and how to respond. God does not want you to destroy yourself. Exhaustion, burnout and depression are not signs that you are doing God's will. God is gentle and loving. God desires to give you a deep sense of safety in God's love. Once you have allowed yourself to experience that love fully, you will be better able to discern who you are being sent to in God's name.¹⁰

Hope and beliefs

Resilient people have a sense of hope.¹¹ Hope can protect against anxiety.¹² Psychological research indicates that it is helpful to have a sense of realistic optimism, although false optimism can be less helpful, as it means that we are not prepared for the hard times that inevitably come at some point.¹³

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were told that they would be thrown into a blazing furnace if they did not worship a gold image. They replied, 'If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us... But even if he does not... we will not serve your gods' (Daniel 3:17-18). This is a good example of living in hope, and also accepting the reality that everything might not work out in this life and having peace about that, trusting in the life to come.

God did not prevent Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from being thrown into the furnace, but he was with them in the furnace. God did not stop Daniel from being thrown to lions, but he sent an angel to be with Daniel and close the mouths of the lions (Daniel 6:19-22). God did not intervene to take the Israelites out of the desert when they were wandering around for 40 years, but he was with them in the desert and provided what they needed (Deuteronomy 8:2-3).

People with faith in God can pray for help and strength during difficult times, and can remind themselves that God is with them. 'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me' (Psalm 23:4). We may go through the 'darkest valley', but God will be with us. That is realistic optimism.

The 'darkest valley' may describe our darkest times. Karen Carr has paraphrased this verse as:

Even though I will lose loved ones, have financially lean times, deal with conflicts and misunderstandings, and face health issues, I don't have to be afraid or take control because you've got this [covered]. You'll never leave or abandon me. You are in front of me, beside me, and behind me. No threat or danger is bigger than your protection of me. I can be relaxed... because you are the one at the helm.¹⁴

Our sense of hope is based on our beliefs. The Bible teaches the following, which provides Christians with a secure sense of hope:

- God created us, and loves us (Genesis 1:27; Psalm 139:13; John 3:16)
- We will be forgiven if we ask God for forgiveness (1 John 1:9)
- The Holy Spirit is always with us, so that we are never alone (John 14:16; Matthew 28:20)
- We can pray at any time and know that God hears us (1 John 5:14–15; Psalm 65:2)
- If we believe and trust in Jesus, we will have eternal life (John 3:16; 11:25)
- God has provided spiritual armour for the spiritual battles we face (Ephesians 6:10–18)

See Appendix B for a ‘resilience creed’ listing more biblical truths related to resilience.

In dark times, I find it helpful to ask myself, ‘Will this matter in the light of eternity?’ Hurts, disappointments, embarrassments and problems can seem overwhelming when we experience them, but we can remind ourselves that in the light of eternity they will not be important. Taking an eternal perspective is our main source of hope and help when we face the possibility of our own death. As the apostle Paul wrote, ‘to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain’ (Philippians 1:21).

I met a woman in El Salvador whose house flooded every day in the rainy season. Her young child would cling to her neck as she stood surrounded by water in her home. The woman’s face shone as she told me, ‘We are rich, because we have God.’ This is a picture of resilience – trusting God despite difficult circumstances, and believing that in eternity, ‘All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well’, as Julian of Norwich said.

In *The Message* version of Micah 7:7–9, we read:

But me, I'm not giving up.
I'm sticking around to see what God will do.
I'm waiting for God to make things right.
I'm counting on God to listen to me.

Don't, enemy, crow over me.
I'm down, but I'm not out.
I'm sitting in the dark right now,
but God is my light.
I can take God's punishing rage.
I deserve it – I sinned.
But it's not forever. He's on my side
and is going to get me out of this.
He'll turn on the lights and show me his ways.
I'll see the whole picture and how right he is.

Hope can include believing that God can work all things for good, and believing that God is still present even in the darkest circumstances. Lesley Bilinda was a nurse working for Tearfund in Rwanda when the genocide broke out in 1994. Her husband and friends were murdered, and her home destroyed. She wrote:

It was like being in the tiny pinpoint of calm at the centre of a massive whirlwind... I have been stripped in one fell swoop of so much that made up my life – my husband, my home, my job, some of my dear friends... But at the bottom of it all, God is still there. I *know* he is still in control, and that he *will* bring good out of all this... It's inexpressibly painful. But in a way, it's a mysterious and awesome privilege.¹⁵

Forgiveness

Lesley Bilinda went on to write a second book, which grapples with the complex subject of forgiveness.¹⁶ Research indicates that forgiving helps us to recover physically, emotionally and mentally, when compared with holding on to resentment.¹⁷ This is not to imply that forgiveness is easy. Forgiveness is not the same as saying that it doesn't matter. Forgiveness involves feeling the pain and acknowledging that wrong has been done, but choosing to leave justice to God (and, if necessary, the courts) rather than seeking vengeance ourselves. Forgiveness starts with a choice. It may be a lifelong process rather than a quick and easy answer. We can forgive (with God's help) without ever contacting the other party. Forgiveness sets us free from bitterness, and helps us to grow in resilience. We also need to be able to receive forgiveness from God and from others, and to learn to forgive ourselves.

Gratitude

A substantial body of research has been conducted to explore the consequences of gratitude. For example, in one study participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups and given a weekly task to do for ten weeks. One group was asked to describe five things they were grateful for that week. Another group was asked to describe five hassles they had experienced in the week. The third group was asked simply to list five events that had happened to them in the week. At the end of the ten weeks, participants in the gratitude group reported feeling better about their lives as a whole and being more optimistic about the future than the other groups. They also reported fewer symptoms of physical illness than the other groups.¹⁸ Other research reported in the same book had similar findings, indicating that people who practise gratitude regularly tend to be happier, healthier and more optimistic than those who don't, and also tend to have better sleep, more energy and better relationships.

Barbara Fredrickson conducted research after the 11 September terrorist attacks. She found that people who reported compassion and gratitude ‘had greater resilience and were less likely to suffer depression post-9/11... Gratitude and other positive emotions seemed to exert a protective effect.’¹⁹

Sabbath, stillness and silence

We benefit from having rhythms in life, including times to pause and rest. The fourth commandment states, ‘Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy... On it you shall not do any work’ (Exodus 20:8, 10).

This commandment comes before the ones about not committing murder or adultery. We do not make excuses with the other commandments, saying that this week is an exception, but many Christians make exceptions concerning the sabbath, saying that it has been a busy week. Rest is essential, even at the busiest times – ‘even during the ploughing season and harvest you must rest’ (Exodus 34:21).

In the New Testament, we read of the continuing sabbath principle: ‘There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God... Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience’ (Hebrews 4:9, 11).

Tony has written more about the theology of rest in *Working from a Place of Rest*.²⁰ Some people need to work on Sunday; they might choose another day for their sabbath. Whichever day we choose to be our sabbath, we benefit from having a day when we do not have to be productive, and we have unrushed time to spend with God and with people we care about. Having a day when we do not shop (and therefore do not make others work) can be refreshing. In *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Martha Dawn describes the immense enjoyment that can come from keeping a weekly sabbath day of celebration and relaxation.²¹

In Psalm 46:10, God tells us to 'be still, and know that I am God'. In the western world today, most people are not very good at being still or stopping. And yet there are a lot of benefits to be gained from doing this. Awareness, slowing down and meditation have all been associated with improved mental health. For example, meditation has been found to help reduce anxiety and to reduce rumination on problems, as well as boosting the immune system. Silence may help to reduce blood pressure and heart rate, and make us more calm.²² Moreover, if we are quiet and still we may be able to hear God's gentle whisper. By observing sabbath times, we are honouring God, as we are obeying his commands and acknowledging that work and activity are not our gods. The universe can carry on without us while we rest.

Community that shares a similar ethos

Our resilience can be strengthened if we belong to a community that shares a similar ethos and that supports us. This reduces isolation and builds confidence. A church or small group can provide this fellowship and social support, including practical, emotional and prayer support. Research with over 74,000 participants has found that attending weekly church services is associated with a significantly lower mortality rate than not attending church, after adjusting for other major lifestyle factors.²³

Resilient in faith

People from any faith or no faith can practise the principles of resilience listed above, but Christians have the benefit of these being written into a Christian lifestyle. Life has meaning when we believe that God is with us. We are called to follow God's leading, whatever that might look like in our lives. We have hope of God's help in this life, and of being with God in eternity. The Bible teaches us to forgive and be forgiven (Matthew 6:12, 14), and to have an attitude

of gratitude (Colossians 3:15–17). Instead of getting caught up in pressure to succeed, the Bible encourages us to have different values and learn to slow down and practise stillness and sabbath rest. We are also encouraged to have fellowship with others who share our values and who support us with prayer and encouragement.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that research has indicated that having a religious faith tends to produce positivity (or optimism), motivation and faster recovery from trauma²⁴ – all of which are associated with resilience.

How can we remain resilient in our faith, and not lose our faith either gradually or suddenly? This is a difficult question to answer. Having a deep knowledge of the Bible helps, as we are reminded of what we believe, and of the hope that we have. But we need more than knowledge; we also need to put our faith into practice in order to build our lives on solid rock (Matthew 7:24–25). It helps to have people around who support us in our faith journey. This might include a spiritual director or mentor, an accountability partner or a fellowship group. Some people turn their back on God when they go through difficult life events, such as a traumatic bereavement or accident. It helps if we have already thought through a theology of suffering that allows us to respond to such crises (see chapter 8), and if we can accept that we don't have all the answers as to why these things happen. Often as people progress in their faith journey, their outlook becomes less black and white. They are less sure that they have all the answers, more accepting of doubt, mystery and unknowns, and perhaps more sure about the most central aspects of faith, such as the importance of love.²⁵ As we mature, we may focus more on what we *do* believe, and less on what we don't believe.

Spiritual disciplines

Something else that can be beneficial is practising disciplines that help us to feel that we are connecting with God. Gary Thomas

describes nine ‘sacred pathways’, or spiritual temperaments, which help us draw near to God:

- activism (confronting evil through social action);
- asceticism (solitude and simplicity);
- awareness of God through the senses (such as using candles or incense);
- caregiving (serving others);
- contemplation (quiet times in the presence of God);
- enthusiasm (celebration, such as singing and dancing);
- intellectualism (Bible study);
- naturalism (experiencing God in nature);
- traditionalism (ritual and symbol, such as liturgy and the Eucharist).²⁶

Myra Perrine expands upon this in her book *What's Your God Language?*,²⁷ explaining that sometimes our preferred way of connecting with God is different from the emphasis of our church tradition. In order to have spiritual vitality for the long haul, it helps if we can find our ‘God language’ and make a place for it in daily life. There are benefits to be gained from exploring many of these different spiritual pathways and letting our relationship with God permeate our whole life, and not just the head, as we practise the presence of God throughout the day.

We are most likely to be able to sustain a vibrant faith if our faith infuses all that we do and is not just a Sunday supplement. Intentional faith development²⁸ can include regular prayer, Bible study and worship, times of retreat, and reading about the experiences and wisdom of other Christians, including those who have maintained a strong faith during difficult times. It is helpful to have times when we reflect, either with others or through our own journaling, and review honestly how we are doing spiritually, and what would help us to grow deeper in our faith. Finally, we can determine that we will choose to be faithful to God (and honest about difficulties) whatever we encounter in life – depending not on

our own strength, but on the strength that comes from God. For God has said, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Building resilience in children: spiritual development

We learn a bit from what we are formally taught, but we learn more from what we experience in our daily lives. If children grow up observing people turning to God for help, they are likely to learn to do this too. If they live in an environment where people express gratitude and offer forgiveness, they are more likely to do the same. Children who hear people speaking with hope about the future, and especially about eternal life, can pick up this atmosphere of hope even in difficult times. Families can get into a habit of praying and reading the Bible together before a child even understands language, and the child will gradually learn of God's ways.

In the next chapter we will consider the life of Nehemiah, an example of someone who had a sense of calling (or a burden from God) and who lived a life of prayer and faithfulness, relying on God's strength.

Questions

- 1 How is your spiritual resilience at the moment?
- 2 What step could you take this month to increase your spiritual resilience? Will you do it?
- 3 What are you grateful for this week?
- 4 Do you take a sabbath day each week? How do you spend it?

- 5 How are you helping others (children or adults) to prepare for spiritual challenges?

- 6 In *The Message*, Psalm 27:14 states, 'Stay with God! Take heart. Don't quit.' Do you ever feel like giving up your faith? What, if anything, helps you continue in the Christian faith?



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