

## Christian Resilience (Part 1)

Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020

Readings: Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35, 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11, John 17:1-11, Acts 2:1-16

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Rev. Dr. Colin S. Marshall

The theme of resilience is one that has been much bandied about in commercial circles over the last few years. In essence, resilience is defined variously as the ability and process of adapting positively in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or other significant sources of stress. *Harvard psychologist George Vaillant describes resilient individuals as resembling a twig with a fresh green living core. When twisted out of shape, such a twig bends, but it does not break; instead, it springs back and continues growing.* As we look at the state of the world now, we can see that there is a great need to develop resilience. As Christians, we have an incredible resource and history, covering millennia, when it comes to issues related to resilience, the Scriptures are full of learning material. Being resilient, in our lifetime, has never been as important as it is right now and over the next two weeks, we are going to be encouraged by how we can build our resilience in faith. Tools which can be critical in such times as this.

There is a lot of material you can research in this area and this morning I want to acknowledge the book titled *Resilience* by Steven Southwick and Dennis Charney which is an excellent and readable summary of key aspects of this topic, and the Christian perspective on resilience given in an article by Dr Sam Thielman of the Christian Medical Association. We are using some of their material as a framework for these two sermons.

There is no doubt that many tests face us throughout life. We have been reflecting over the last few weeks on the challenges the disciples and Jesus' followers faced as they saw Jesus die, then return, then leave again. Their day to day lives, their emotions, thought patterns, their complete view of the world and life was turned completely on its head. Where and how did they find the strength to not only go on but to be agents of change that would start the process that would bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the entire world?

The trigger for change were the events of Easter. The pivot points for change were the resurrection, ascension and Pentecost. Today is, of course, appropriately, the day we remember Pentecost. Events and change are what reveal how good our resilience practices are. Be it a death of a loved one, a medical issue, a relationship breakdown, a change of circumstance, natural disaster, employment change or issue such as COVID-19 when we are thrown under the bus, as it were, how we are prepared to engage the situation matters. Our methodology, our attitudes and our faith are not only put to the test they are revealed.

In the Scriptures we have a treasury of emotional outpouring in a whole range of situations from national disaster, economic loss, personal injury to the loss of a child. The books of Job, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and the Psalms all reveal the various depths of pain and anguish people and nations go through. Each person's pain and torment is uniquely their own. No one can completely understand the pain that we personally go through. Just as we wonder at what Jesus went through on the Cross for us, we know we can never fully comprehend it. There are tools however to coming through such adversity so that we can grow from it and let it serve us as a stepping stone to a deeper appreciation of life and faith.

Southwick and Charney identify a number of keys to developing good resilience. We are now going to consider a number of these from a Christian perspective.

The first tool in the kit is OPTIMISM. Optimism is a belief in a brighter future. For the Christian this should be a given. The Christian hope is based on what Jesus has already done and the promise that holds for the future. We know that "*all things work for the good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose*" (Romans 8:28). The source of our hope and optimism in life is not in ourselves or our own abilities but in the unchangeable nature and character of God and the promises God has made to us. Because of this the author of Hebrews writes that we have "*hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*" (Heb 6:19).

Because we know that the future is bright and ultimately God will work everything out we have every reason to keep working forward positively. As we consider the parable of the sheep and the goats, the rich man and Lazarus, we know that we have our part to play, our duty to do, in helping God sharing the love of God and taking part in building His kingdom which will, whatever the odds, be achieved.

The second tool is MANAGING FEAR. Fear of the dark, symbolically of the unknown, is as old as humanity. Again, as Christians, we don't let fear dominate us. Through the eyes of faith we can look to the Lord as our comfort and assistance. This is far too complex a topic to go into here but God gives us the backup, to address any fear, as in His perfect love all fear is driven out. In the Old Testament David reflects this attitude brilliantly in Psalm 27: ***"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defence of my life; whom shall I dread? When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh, my adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell. Though a host encamp against me, My heart will not fear; Though war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident."*** Christian optimism doesn't look through the eyes of fear, it looks through the eyes of faith. Nelson Mandela, imprisoned in South Africa for years, said *"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. ... The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid but he who conquers that fear."* To become resilient we have to learn to face our fears.

When I was a teenager I was seriously into trampolining. One day I was attempting a multiple backflip than ended up landing in my stomach. I over-pushed on the take-off and landed on my stomach perfectly ... on the concrete pad behind the trampoline with a loud thud. My mother, hearing the sound came over and told me to get up, get on the tramp and do it again properly. She didn't seem to care how I felt but I did as I was told. In fact I did it correctly over and again multiple times until I had it perfect. Only later did she tell me that if I hadn't face the fear straight away and mastered it I would likely have never have attempted it again. I saw other competitors that that had happened too who dropped out. It was a good life lesson. Address fears early, fully and deal with them so they don't control you.

How did Daniel in the lions' den or his friends threatened with fire address their fears? They dealt with what they had to and they held on to God for the solution. I love the approach of Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3:17-18 as they replied King Nebuchadnezzar, ***"...If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."*** God calls us to trust Him and face our fears, whatever they are, and deal with them. In doing so we will not held back in what the Lord wants us to achieve, now will we be held back in our own personal growth.

The third tool for building resilience is our MORAL COMPASS. Our moral compass gives us our direction in decision making. Consistent studies have demonstrated that people with a clear moral compass tend to have greater resilience. In essence, our moral compass tells us what is right or wrong in any situation. So, here is a great Pentecost Day revelation. Whilst so often the focus at Pentecost is on the dramatic manifestation of spiritual gifts ... for what purpose did Jesus say He was sending the Holy Spirit? According to John 14:15ff the Holy Spirit was being sent to be our Comforter and to guide us into truth and (John 15:26) to teach us about Jesus. No one could ever have better assistance in moral direction. Christians have the Scriptures, thousands of years of history and example, Jesus life story and on top of that the active presence of God in our lives by the Holy Spirit, prompting and directing us. Or for some, constantly jiggling away at the conscience. Unlike a faulty compass wavering between magnetic sources our moral compass is perfectly set, on Jesus, to walk as Jesus, did kept on target by the power of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes that moral compass may bring us into conflict with the prevailing ethos. When it does we are reminded as the apostle Paul states in

Philippians 1:30, that *“it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him”*. There will be times when we suffer but it is not without purpose. Knowing there is purpose in what is happening also builds our resilience.

The fourth tool for building resilience is defined as DRAWING ON FAITH. In multiple studies people have consistently identified calling on their faith as one of the most critical, if not the most critical, way of managing in times of crisis. Some of the traditional aspects of faith are of particular importance: prayer, fasting, quiet reflection (some might call it mindfulness today) and reflecting on memorised Scripture. Worshipping together, however this is done, is also incredibly important. Throughout history, from the New Testament up until today, Christians have been known to sing in prisons, even when forbidden, binding their voices in worship even when physically distanced and alone for days to years at a time. A UK university study a number of years ago showed people of faith came out of hospital faster than their contemporaries at a statistically discernable rate ... in some areas significantly so. Key recognitions in our Christian faith around guilt, forgiveness and God’s love for us, in times of stress, speak to people at the most fundamental level. While the old adage “there are no atheists in foxholes” may not be 100% accurate for the vast majority it is true. In times of trouble we draw on our faith no matter how great or little it is. And the cool thing is ... God is always there for us.

The fifth tool is generically titled SOCIAL SUPPORT. We are not made to be alone, we know this from Genesis 1. If there is a great lesson from the firey tongues of Pentecost it was that each person heard the good news in their own native tongue. We are strengthened by each other, by conversations, prayers, humour, shared experience. As Christians our connectedness, at multiple levels, as the family of God, is part of our DNA. We need to work at this all the time, particularly at present. But by connecting, by calls, phone, video, letter, email and social media, we maintain and strengthen our resilience regardless of our physical situation. Not only that but the Holy Spirit, as our Advocate, helps us to communicate with God, even with “groans” if necessary where word run out. As Christians we are never alone no matter where we are in the world.

The last tool we’re going to talk about today is ROLE MODELS. Let’s face it – we don’t know everything about everything and we don’t want to learn everything by trial and error. One of the best things we have in life is role models and we all have them for better or worse. Most of us probably look back on some things from our childhoods and recognise some good and some bad models we have copied. It’s easy when you’ve had children – there are times you look back and think *“oh dear – I remember my mum or dad saying that to me”*. Consciously or unconsciously we role model what we have learned from others. As Christians we have three great blessings: we have the lessons and models from the Scriptures we can look back at and reflect on. We have (hopefully) good role models in Christians we see about us. We know that they are not perfect, but we can see their walk over time and how they have grown. And best of all, we have the example of Jesus and the Holy Spirit reminding us of what He would do.

That’s enough for today ... next week we will consider a few more tools for building resilience from a Christian perspective.

AMEN