

## **Resilience – the essence of a right spirit**

*Resilience* is a word loaded with popular definitions. There have been conferences, television shows and books written about resilience, and every academic discipline has its own understanding of the word. Resilience is regarded as the key to good “outcomes” in life. In Christian parlance we might say resilience is essential to victory over our circumstances. A superficial spirituality says we only need to trust Jesus, yet experience tells us that many Christians fall apart at the first hurdle despite their faith affirming words. Yet God dignified humanity by trusting us to help ourselves: giving us “dominion” (Genesis) means handing over responsibility to us. Developing resilience is our part .....it is what we must do to live well.

Research has shown that resilience is an important characteristic for emotional survival for children who suffer deprivation, poverty and abuse. It is a key to sustainability in eco systems, economics and physics. Resilience is also the key to an authentic Christian life.

Resilience is not evident until times get tough.

The Psalmist King David wrote about resilience in Psalm 51 where he plans to turn his life around with God’s help. He asks for new joy and a *right spirit*, sometimes translated *steadfast spirit*. His life was in melt-down because a prophet had forced him to face some ugly truths. David had been lying to himself and to everyone around him, pretending to be a great leader when in fact he was greedy, manipulative and adulterous, and willing to sacrifice the lives of others on the altar of his own ambition.

The Hebrew word translated *right* in this context means perpendicular – upright – with nuances of steadfastness, willingness, preparedness, stability. In other words, a right spirit is a

resilient spirit. It is the spirit of an individual who is still standing, exercising integrity, ready for action, regardless of circumstances...even circumstances of our own making.

In physics and engineering resilience is described as the *capacity of a structure to absorb energy*. When the first of the Twin Towers was hit by a fuel-laden aircraft, the energy of the impact was absorbed, at great human cost. The energy of the second catastrophic impact caused the buildings to implode, buckling and collapsing under the shock. I use this description here as a metaphor of the way humans respond to the hammer blows of tragic events – we can only absorb so much.

In psychology resilience is described as *constant competence under stress*. It is not about withstanding catastrophe so much as standing upright in the face of relentless, impoverishing, diminishing, destructive influences that might make us angry, bitter, or sick and sorry for ourselves. Stress sometimes gives us a sense of entitlement: I'm putting up with so much stuff that I need something for me (another drink, another hit, another sexual adventure).

The writer Jeannette Walls in *The Glass Castle (2005)* described a childhood of bleak neglect in middle America. Her hippie parents placed no value on work, and there were no regular meals, and often, no clothes, beds or basic hygiene. As soon as they were able, all of the children took control of their own lives, fended for one another, found ways to get food, shelter and an education. Many children raised in poverty, sometimes with sickness and rejection, do not become victims, but dig down to discover a resilience that sustains them. While we busily protect ourselves and others from stress, we sometimes rob them of an opportunity to strengthen their faith and resourcefulness.

In ecology resilience is the tension between constancy and change. A resilient ecosystem can tolerate shocks and rebuild itself. Human beings are physiologically resilient: the central nervous system can find pathways around damage, and our capacity for adaptation to extreme

conditions is surprising. People often survive catastrophic injuries, sickness and the loss of function or nutrition. In economics, resilience is *the capacity to sustain financial interruption*. Many small businesses go to the wall rapidly because they were not prepared for unpredictable trends in income and expenditure.

For the Psalmist King David resilience was about making a come-back after the most shameful failures. He could not deny his adultery, but he could acknowledge that he was the author of the catastrophe that came on his house. In recognising the truth about himself, this harp-playing warrior also saw the way ahead. He told God how badly he has stuffed up his entire life, and then baldly asked God to clean up his (David's) act and help him retrieve self-esteem, respect, and the right to lead others. Most of us do not expect God to be so forgiving. Most of us are shocked when Christians do as David did (adultery, murder, manipulation, mayhem). We sing songs about dancing, praising and worshipping like David did, but we forget that David's freedom and joy came out of a incredible wounding, not just over Bathsheba, but throughout his entire life. David was a person who had been knocked down seven times and was getting up for the eighth when he wrote Psalm 51.

Resilience for the Christian begins with authenticity: inward truth. It grows as we abandon the childish ideas of entitlement, imagining we are good and therefore God owes us. It is reinforced when we repair the stress fractures and get on with life, without rancour and doubt, willing to live without immunity to uncertainty, insecurity and ambiguity. David's life was messed up by a sense of entitlement – a pitfall of the rich, famous and successful – wanting more, wanting what she's having, and thinking you have an inherent right to ease and plenty. Resilience is demonstrated by a fresh willingness to make bricks of straw, and to be grateful for the strength to try.

Ann Jensen (2007) ©

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