

Resilience Part 2

A childhood memory of mine was of watching our very small and blurry, black and white T.V. and seeing Roger Bannister achieving his goal of running a mile in less than four minutes. The race took place on the 6th of May 1954. It was hailed worldwide as an epic achievement, although in the event he only held the record for 46 days.

Recently I watched the race again on Youtube and was struck by how similar it was to the picture of a disciple running the race as recorded in Hebrews 12:1-3. The metaphor of a race is used several times in the New Testament and can highlight for us the resilience of faith that will help us to continue following Christ and to finish well.

There were several parallels I noticed in watching the race, for example, there were six men who started the race but it wasn't competitive in the sense that they were not running against each other but to encourage Roger Bannister to finish the race and to achieve the goal. They were pace setters who kept him going when he must have felt like giving up. Just as we need those running with us in the Christian life, not to compete against or compare ourselves with, but to accompany us on the way and to encourage us to be the best for Christ and to keep going to win the prize.

The success of the race did not just happen, it was the result of years of training with Oxford University and the 3A's that would have been both gruelling and at times tedious, requiring great personal discipline. In the same way following Christ requires discipline if we are not to lose our way. The discipline that we need to exercise ourselves in spending time with the Lord in the Word and prayer and seeking to obey him in applying it to our lives. Also in responding to the discipline of God in our lives as He is seeking to make us more like Christ. "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons." Hebrews 12:7.

The race was run with intentionality, with a clear goal in mind and with every effort focussed on reaching that goal. Hebrews 12:2 stresses "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the throne of the right hand of God." Christ has done everything necessary for us to finish well, but we need to keep the goal clear and to fix our eyes on him. There are many other goals in life that can captivate our hearts and in so doing they may subtly take our eyes off Jesus and that finishing line.

In his commentary on the experience of the race Roger Bannister refers so often to the part the crowd played. As in the verses in Hebrews, the crowd are almost on the track cheering and willing him on. The roar of the crowd in the final stages of the race was so loud that it pulled him over the line, when he was so exhausted and as he described it, filled with both joy and anguish. We need to be part of that great fellowship of believers both worldwide and locally. In chapter 11 of Hebrews we are exhorted not to neglect to meet together, because we need each other and we cannot go it alone in the Christian life. Also we have a responsibility to be part of the crowd cheering on the next generation.

Observing the spectators it would seem that it wasn't a warm May day when Bannister was racing, since they are clothed in overcoats, hats, scarves etc., whereas the athletes are

sporting their thin 3A's vests and shorts with the typical black running spikes of the day. Although they did not have available to them the scientifically constructed clothing of today, they were making sure that they were not carrying any non-essential extra weight or anything that would impede their running or prevent them from finishing the race well. Just as the writer to the Hebrews encourages believers to throw off anything that hinders and entangles us in following Christ. These may be unconfessed, hidden sins, resentments, bitterness, unresolved conflicts and broken relationships. There may be disappointments, losses or hurts from the past that we still carry round with us as a burden. We may have faced experiences that have challenged our faith or understanding of who God is but not felt able to own up to them so that they dog our forward path. We need to face up to these issues, to 'throw them off' so that we can run unburdened and focus on what is important.

Bannister recalls how in the early stages of the race the danger was to just go too fast and all out to try to make the time, but his pace makers wisely helped him to keep to a pace that was fast *and* sustainable. For us this demonstrates the danger of pushing ourselves to the point of 'burnout' by making a virtue of busyness and not taking adequate rest or by living constantly to the expectations of others.

One of Bannister's team mates called to him to tell him to relax because Bannister was worried that the pace was too slow and was urging him to go faster. In response he felt that early in the race he became so relaxed that he began running without strain and became mentally detached from what was happening. Fortunately this did not go on for long or he could have been in difficulties. This reminded me of the verse in Hebrews 2:1 "We must pay more careful attention, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away." Drift may result in loss of resilience in our faith because we stop 'steadfastly attending to it', which is one of the definitions of biblical perseverance. Perhaps we drift into a 'Sunday Christian' mentality; or perhaps we drift in our moral or ethical values and go with the culture because it makes for an easier life. We may just drift because 'life' takes up our time and energy – career, children, caring for grandchildren or aging parents etc. – and our spiritual life and ministry is left unattended.

But this was not a problem for long as Bannister explains that the last lap was the most crucial. This was the point at which all the preparation and all the training paid off. He tells of how he strained every muscle as he ploughed on towards the goal of the finishing line. The roar of the crowd was deafening; he described seeing the finishing line as a haven of peace. He almost fell over the line into the arms of those waiting for him and only then truly realised how much pain he was in and almost lost consciousness. Ironically, the noise of the cheering was so great that he didn't know if he had broken the record!

This is a reminder to us that the last quarter of our lives is probably the most crucial in finishing well. Hebrews 12:3 says "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." We may or may not experience opposition at this time in our lives but we are certainly in danger of growing weary and losing heart. We need to depend on God's grace every day as we walk with him and to help us to finish well like Roger Bannister, falling over the line into *His* arms.

In Resilience Part 1 we thought about some of the social and psychological issues that are involved in both our vulnerabilities and our strengths in adversity and some of the ways that we can grow in resilience. These are very helpful and remain as a back drop as we begin to look at how, as believers, our faith can be a source of resilience and how that faith itself can be resilient under pressure, so that we finish well in following Christ.

What does resilience of our faith mean for us?

“Ours is not the question of buckling under overt and severe persecution; rather we face the questions, *can one last and can one grow and can one actually contemplate being more valuable for the kingdom in the second half of life than in the first?* Resilience for first generation Christians had a lot to do with real suffering. Resilience for us has, in most cases more to do with *lasting and thriving* in the spiritual way.” (MacDonald p9)

Resilience is certainly to do with inner strength and a spirit that refuses to be defeated by external challenges and thus the believer in Christ should have available immense resources to enable them to cope and to overcome in all circumstances! But the reality is that we don't *all* cope and that we don't cope *all* of the time.

Michael Neenan in his book *Developing Resilience* takes issue with the popular view of resilience as bouncing back from adversity. He sees this as too simplistic, since for some people the adversity has had a devastating toll both physically and psychologically and for those who have suffered trauma, accidents or disease it may mean that life will never be the same again. He does concede that over time many will be able to cope adaptively to the new and unwelcome circumstances in their lives. But this may not be a 'bounce back' but a slow coming back. The time scale and the journey may vary for different people.

Neenan also suggests that it is unhelpful to think that having come through hard times we will therefore automatically be able to face future adversities, whatever life throws at us. It may be that having summoned all the resources available to overcome some major life event, we then find ourselves completely overwhelmed and unable to cope in a much less serious situation. Resilience is not necessarily a transferable commodity.

“No matter how robust you have become, you still remain vulnerable to coping poorly to future adversities. Vulnerability is not a sign of weakness; no one has absolute resistance to adversity.” (Neenan p6)

Resilience is not developed in social isolation and to need others to help us is not a sign of weakness or failure. Perhaps we feel that if we ask for help or express thoughts, feelings or doubts that we imagine would shock other Christians, that they will think less of us. It may be pride that holds us back from admitting that we can't cope alone, but as we thought last session, strong and honest relationships are vitally important to living a resilient life.

Neenan describes as a puzzle the fact that while one person can endure so much suffering and remain largely optimistic and happy, another person, who experiences much less suffering, retreats into bitterness and victimhood. He suggests that a starting point to understand this may be to discover the meaning, attitudes and beliefs that people attach to life events.

Attitudes to adversity (how we explain life events)

“The meaning of things lies not in the things themselves, but in our attitude towards them”
(Antoine de Saint-Exupery)

According to Michael Neenan attitudes are the evaluations we make of an object, person group, issue, situation or concept. He would say that attitudes have three components:-

1. Thoughts – what we think or believe about a person or situation
2. Emotions – how we feel about a person or situation
3. Behaviour – how we act towards the person or in the situation

Although each one of these influences the others to some extent, what we think and believe in a situation will powerfully affect our ability to adapt and cope and thus to be resilient. For example, if when faced with difficult, unwanted circumstances I think and believe that the situation is completely negative, I will be overwhelmed by negative emotions that result in negative behavioural responses. But if my evaluation can be changed to see genuine meaning and purpose in the circumstances, and my attitude is flexible enough to be adapted, then the resulting feelings and behaviour can be transformed.

Sometimes we don't recognise the thoughts or beliefs that we are espousing when facing a difficult situation and are only aware of our emotions or feelings. We may need to work backwards to look behind the feelings to the beliefs we are holding about ourselves, others or of God, himself, in order to begin to address the issue.

At times, we have all found ourselves stuck in resilience defeating attitudes such as:-

Why me?

This wasn't supposed to happen like this?

Why can't God give me..... Then I would be happy?

I'm a failure; I always mess up.

I'm like this because of my parents; I'll never change.

At a human level we need to take responsibility for our attitudes, to change what can be changed and to learn to accept what can't be changed. But as believers we need to change the lens through which we interpret life events.

We have a wonderful example of this when the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian church from his prison cell, which must have been far from comfortable and a great frustration to getting on with his calling to spread the gospel. But instead of complaining and focussing on the injustice of his situation and 'by the way where was God in the situation', he chose to see both positive meaning and purpose in his circumstances as he rightly related to God and saw the potential benefits of his circumstances, not just its limitations

“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains most of the brothers in

the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." (Philippians 1:12-14)

Paul's resilient attitude to his circumstances meant that he had a positive witness for Christ and his faith and courage was infectious so that his fellow believers were encouraged to be fearless in their witness to the gospel.

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." (Frankl p8)

This statement may owe more to philosophy than faith but put in the context of faith in the God, who gives all of our life meaning and purpose, it bears the ring of truth.

Normalise struggle

One of the areas that we considered in terms of children growing in resilience was this idea of normalising struggle; of not seeing failure as final or of giving up when things are difficult. Paul was told right from the beginning of his call to follow Christ that suffering was an integral part of that call Acts 9:17 "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Paul was careful to pass on that message to those whom he reached with the gospel so that they would not be taken by surprise "Strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" they said." Acts 14:22

He also explained to the Philippians that in contending for the faith they would face opposition and suffering. He saw this as the normal Christian life or, dare I say, as a privilege "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him." Philippians 1:29

In 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 and 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 Paul records formidable lists of the hardships and sufferings that he had endured and saw as part of being a servant of Christ and fulfilling his calling. This is not meant to cause us to welcome adversity or suffering, especially unnecessary suffering; we are not seeking to be masochists, but it is good to be reminded that we were promised suffering and persecution, if we seek to live godly lives for Christ (2 Timothy 3:12). Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world know this all too clearly and we don't know what the future may yet hold for us in this country!

Thoughts

"We all have fallen hearts that are naturally inclined away from worshipping God and towards worshipping our own desires. As our senses perceive an event, thoughts are generated that are moulded by our hearts desires, the wellspring of our life. Our fallen hearts cause our thoughts to be fallen too in *how* we think and in *what* we think." (Haddow p51)

Our thoughts form the functional beliefs by which we evaluate our circumstances and life events; feeding the emotions and resulting behaviours. Thought patterns developed and

rehearsed over many years or perhaps since early childhood can be very difficult to eradicate, especially if they are confirmed by our environment or culture. In the scriptures the transforming and renewing of our minds is seen as vital to bringing change in our Christian life and character.

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:2

Paul also wrote in his letter to the Ephesians 3:22-23 that “to be made new in the attitudes of your mind” was essential to growth in Christlikeness and changed behaviour. It was the key to putting off the old self and putting on the new self.

Michael Neenan in his book *Developing Resilience* explains how when we move directly from a situation that is difficult, upsetting or distressing (A) to the emotional reactions and consequent negative behaviours (C) our ability to be resilient is defeated.

Whereas if between (A) and (C) we insert thoughts and beliefs that we hold and that influence our evaluation of the people and situation we are involved in (B) then this will help to both affect the consequences themselves and our resilience. Neenan calls this moving from AC thinking to ABC thinking. He uses this approach as part of Cognitive behavioural therapy. The premise is that the events themselves don’t cause emotional disturbance but our thoughts about them do. Therefore the aim is to stop or alter the unhelpful thinking styles.

Others use ‘self-talk’ to block or replace unhelpful thought patterns, which can be helpful and effective for many people. But as believers we have the truth of the scriptures, a biblical evaluation of ourselves and our circumstances and the promises of God on which to base our faith and hope. This does not mean chanting verses of scripture like a Buddhist mantra but seriously talking to God about how we feel about ourselves, our circumstances, the issues that we are facing and allowing his presence, his truth and the Holy Spirit to move us from fear, anger, despair, disappointment, bitterness or the desire to run away, hide or just give up, to a place of submission, faith, hope and resilience. The Psalms are full of examples of distressed, discouraged and struggling believers pouring out their concerns before God and experiencing a renewed perspective and hope as they fix their minds on God’s power, wisdom, love and faithfulness.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13

Emotions

“Resilience can be misconstrued as a form of Stoicism; noble forbearance in the face of pain and suffering. To show emotion would be weakness of character.....resilience is actually about managing emotions, not suppressing them.” (Neenan p9)

Catherine Haddow in her book *Emotions mirrors of the Heart* concurs with the concept that emotions in themselves are not bad and are indeed God given and part of what it means to

be human and made in the image of God. But she would also say that “Emotions of all kinds can be good and biblical in energising us and driving us forward, but they can also lead us unhelpfully astray.” (p15)

She describes emotions as a conscious mental reaction, subjectively experienced as a strong feeling, usually directed towards a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioural changes. Emotions (feelings) also force us to pay attention and to respond. They are an important way that God uses to reveal our inner selves and true desires, which in turn are determined by the loyalties of our heart. The problem with our emotions is that they are not reliable and cannot always be trusted.

“We are so easily led to believe that how we feel explains the reality of a situation. We believe that because we feel bad, the situation must be bad. Conversely, we feel good and therefore we conclude that the situation must be good. But the reality is that because of the Fall, we think the wrong things, we do the wrong things and we also feel the wrong things.” (Haddow p18)

How often have we heard sinful behaviour justified on the basis that it ‘feels good’ or a serious life decision made on the subjective basis that it ‘feels right’. Many of us, as believers, still rate our sense of self-worth, acceptance, identity and even our assurance of salvation on how we feel (or what we think others feel about us).

In the face of trials we can be ruled by destructive emotions so that we feel that God has abandoned us, or that he cannot really love us if he has let this awful thing happen, or that in some way God is punishing us. It is so easy to be caught up in emotional bondage and to be led astray by our feelings. Becoming overwhelmed and trapped in such emotions may well hinder our walk with Christ and prevent us maturing in him. In the book of Hebrews we are wisely advised to both “fix your thoughts on Jesus” Hebrews 3:1 and “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus” Hebrews 12:2 to allow him to guide our emotions through a right framework and a world view shaped by biblical truth.

The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart

“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart.” Luke 6:45

Jesus recognised that what we think, say and do are a reflection of what is in our hearts. That is why it is a spiritual problem that ultimately requires a spiritual solution. Jesus died to redeem our hearts and to deal with the sin that comes out of our hearts (Mark 7:20-23). But, even as believers, our hearts are ‘idol factories’ when we choose to worship anything more than we worship God.

“Our emotions aren’t simply triggered by our thoughts and perceptions of an event. Rather our heart’s desires are what flow out into our lives through our thoughts, our physiological responses, our emotional responses and behaviours. And our heart’s desires are determined by our heart’s loyalties – what we worship.” (Haddow p35)

When our career, a relationship, financial security, acceptance by others, success, the right to a comfortable life etc. become the primary desire of our hearts, then it has functionally become our god.

“Our hearts are dynamic, too easily swinging between God and the competing pulls of the world. When the competing attractions are dominant, we experience ‘gospel eclipse’: we stop worshipping God, the giver of all good things, and instead begin to worship our other desires. When we possess what has captured our hearts, we feel good; when we don’t, or it is threatened, emotional disturbance arises.” (Haddow p36)

Haddow would say that this emotional disturbance should alert us to what is really going on in our hearts and needs attention. (The following quote is long but helpful)

“When we worship our perceived need more than we worship God, though we profess Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, in truth we trust him for our salvation but not as Lord over everything in our lives. We believe he is the perfect judge, but we don’t trust him to deal with someone who has greatly angered or hurt us. We know he is in control of everything, but we cannot sleep due to worry over a relationship. We believe that we will have an eternity with him in heaven, but we doubt he is with us now in our feelings of loss. Though we believe his promises with our heads, the desire of our personal needs prevents us from connecting this to our hearts. This then causes us to live out our needs through our emotions, thoughts and behaviours.” (Haddow p107)

We need to bring our emotional struggles to the word of God and allow it to inform us of the condition of our heart and what Christ is doing in our lives. God wants to use the daily difficulties, struggles and frustrations of our lives to reveal our hearts and then to transform us into the likeness of his Son.

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Hebrews 4:12

Living out of our identity in Christ

We often think of problems of identity being the province of the younger generation; those trying to establish who they are and being confused by the pressures of social media. But it may be that the second half of life also provides many opportunities to test where our identity lies. Timothy Keller would say that for the human heart there is a powerful inclination to make work, and its attendant benefits, the main basis of one’s meaning and identity. Perhaps it is only possible to really know if this is the case when through redundancy, illness or retirement work is lost.

Simon Walker writes about those who are naturally leaders in their field of work; busy people, activists, always looking for a challenge. For these people knowing ‘who I am’ as distinct from ‘what I do’ can be difficult, in fact they may only know themselves through the things they do and the roles they play.

“When we’re in pain we’re often incapacitated, taken out of the action and unable to influence it. From this position of enforced passivity and powerlessness, we have to confront a stark question: Who are we? Who am I without the props of my job around me? Who am I without feedback.....affirmation.....being indispensable to everyone around? Who am I when I am alone, when the mobile is silent and the in box is empty and the world goes on without me? Who am I then? In a place of struggle, we must find an answer that is not related to our activities or roles. We are challenged to find an identity that is not threatened by the loss of such things.” (Walker p146-147)

There may be other areas that threaten our identity as we get older such as the outward signs of aging, issues with our appearance, loss of our physical powers, memory or health. It could be that we feel invisible that our contribution is no longer needed or wanted, even in our church or other arenas. Perhaps the nest has long been empty and our children are established in their own families and no longer need us.

The apostle Paul was in no doubt where his identity was fixed when he wrote “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Philippians 1:21. He had eschewed putting his confidence in any of his human and religious assets or achievements and wrote “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Philippians 3:8

In order to be resilient and to withstand the losses and pressures of the second half of our lives we need an identity that is based on who we are in God’s estimation; a new creation through Christ’s death on the cross and adopted into his family. God declares us to be:-

- Blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Ephesians 1:3
- Chosen before the creation of the world Ephesians 1:4
- Blameless in God’s sight Ephesians 1:4
- Loved and adopted as his child Ephesians 1:5
- Recipient of God’s grace Ephesians 1:6
- Redeemed Ephesians 1:7
- Forgiven Ephesians 1:7
- To live for the praise of his glory Ephesians 1:12
- Included in Christ Ephesians 1:13
- Sealed with the Holy Spirit Ephesians 1:13
- Guaranteed eternal inheritance Ephesians 1:14

“These all remain true, even on the days we don’t feel loved, secure or blessed.....We can live fearlessly, in peace, with thankfulness, courageously and contented knowing the scriptural truths concerning who we truly are in Christ.” (Haddow p116)

Growth in adversity

When we are going through pain, suffering or hardship of any kind, our first thought is not about how it will help us to grow or how it can be productive in our lives. Tim Keller in his book *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, explains that suffering will leave you a much better person or a much worse one than you were before. He says that trials and troubles in life, which are inevitable, will either make you or break you. But either way you

will not remain the same. The difference seems to be how we respond to what God is doing through the adversity. The right approach to suffering can lead to remarkable growth.

“Every adversity that comes across our path, whether large or small, is intended to help us grow in some way. If it were not beneficial, God would not allow it or send it “For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men” God does not delight in our sufferings. He brings only that which is necessary, but he does not shrink from that which will help us grow.” (Bridges p189)

How God uses suffering in our lives to strengthen our resilience:-

Pruning for fruitfulness, John 15:2 - Suffering reveals our pride and our weaknesses since it brings out the worst in us. It reminds us of our vulnerability and our need to depend on God, not to rely on ourselves, our natural gifts and human wisdom. It exposes the flaws in our character and the frailty of our faith as we seek to be in control rather than to trust in God. It loosens our grip on that which is unfruitful in our lives and reminds us what is really important and of eternal value.

Deepens our dependence and relationship with God, John 15:5 – suffering is the greatest test of our relationship with God. Keller suggests that when times are good, how do we know that we really love God, or just love his good gifts to us? When we enjoy good health and prosperity and life is going well it is easy to think that we love and depend on God as we go through the outward routines of our Christian lives. But when suffering comes it reveals the genuineness of our faith and whether that faith really is in God, himself (1Peter 1:6-7). Suffering drives us to our knees and to pray like we have never prayed before.

“Through adversity we learn to bow before His sovereignty, to trust His wisdom, and to experience the consolations of His love, until we come to the place where we can say with Job, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.” (Job 42:5) We begin to pass from knowing *about* God to knowing God himself in a personal and intimate way.” (Bridges p204)

Teaches us to live by the grace of God – As believers, we readily accept that we are saved by God’s grace but with the passage of time we can slip into feeling that our relationship with God is more about our service for him, what we do, so that we revert to trying to be acceptable to God on the basis of our performance. The apostle Paul learned through painful suffering and experiencing personal weakness, that dependence on the grace of God allowed Christ’s power to be demonstrated in his life.

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest upon me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:8-10

Suffering produces perseverance – Romans 5:3-5, Perseverance is a quality of character that enables us to pursue a goal in spite of obstacles and difficulties. It is more than simply enduring under pressure or hardship but a pressing forward with determination and

diligence. It has more to do with the marathon than the sprint and has something to do with 'grit' and the refusal to give up in the face of failure or setbacks. In Hebrews 10 the writer reminds the believers of all that they had withstood in terms of suffering, insults and persecution for their faith and encourages them now not to give up "So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised." Hebrews 10:35-36

God wants us to finish well the race set before us but it will require us to run with perseverance, to continue doing God's will and, despite the obstacles, to press on to the goal.

Making us more useful in God's service – In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Paul wrote "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."

Having received comfort ourselves from God, we are better equipped to come along side others who are suffering adversity to bring comfort and encouragement in times of distress.

Belief in God's sovereignty

"A subtle expectation of uninterrupted ease, coupled with the thought that the "good" life is the pain free life, leaves us often frustrated, confused, and angry when suffering comes our way. It is hard for us to "count it all joy" when the pain we are experiencing not only doesn't seem good in itself, but seems like an unnecessary obstacle in the way of obviously good things," (Tripp p180)

This quote captures very well the feelings that we often experience when the reality of our lives does not meet what we consider to be the best plan. Our genuine faith and trust in God's power, love and wisdom can be thrown into confusion by, not only the major trials of life such as serious illness, accident or loss but also by minor setbacks such as being held up in a traffic jam, inclement weather that spoils our holiday, or not getting the job that we applied for.

The internal struggle that we feel results from the temptation to believe that somehow the plans that I have for my life in this area are better than God's. It brings into question in our minds God's sovereign power over events, his wisdom to know what is really best for us or our loved ones and finally it creates doubt over God's loving purposes in our lives. If we do not take these struggles to the Lord and seek his help and perhaps the help of others, we can end up in a kind of functional atheism that seeks to order events and strives to manipulate people to fit our idea of how things should be. In effect we dethrone God and make ourselves god in our own lives.

This is not to minimise the terrible pain and anguish that many go through over young lives that succumb to the ravages of cancer, the desperate loss felt by those who grieve or who are childless, the awful sense of the pointlessness of a child killed by a drunk driver and the lifelong prayers for a loved one to come to know the Lord which seem to go unheeded.

Tim Keller writes of Job's inexplicable suffering:-

"Job's suffering was not a chastisement or a lesson aimed at changing a particular flaw in Job's life. But that didn't mean that it wasn't a powerful vehicle both for Job's personal growth and for God's glory.....when this kind of mysterious, inexplicable suffering comes upon us, our journey is also a long one. It certainly may entail repentance, forgiveness, and fixing our eyes on our hopes. But Job type suffering requires a process of honest prayer and crying, the hard work of deliberate trust in God, and what St Augustine called the reordering of our loves." (p212)

Our belief in the sovereignty of God does not remove both the responsibility to pray and to take what actions we are able to in difficult circumstances. Nehemiah when faced with the threat of his enemies whilst rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem first prayed and thus acknowledged his dependence on God's sovereign care and then took what precautions he could by posting a guard. "But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat." Nehemiah 4:9

When Paul was being transported to Rome and their ship was being battered by a severe storm and everyone was terrified, Paul was able to encourage them that God had expressly revealed to him that he and all who sailed with him would be safe. He believed, against the odds of his circumstances, that God was sovereign in the situation, but he also took action when the sailors were about to abandon ship in the lifeboat, by instructing the centurion to prevent them, since they were needed to ensure the safety of the ship. He didn't confuse his belief in God's sovereignty with his responsibility to act wisely.

My favourite verse concerning the sovereignty of God is Genesis 50:20 "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." Joseph said these words to his brothers, the very people who had deliberately started a cycle of apparent misfortunes and injustices, but which God had used ultimately to accomplish his purposes both for Joseph and his family, who under God's hand would become the nation of Israel and the cradle that would bring forth the Saviour of the world.

Joseph's resilience under mistreatment, injustice, imprisonment and betrayal, with God's hand on his life, was part of God's overarching plan of redemption for the world. To a large extent that resilience was fuelled by trust in a sovereign God who was working all things out for his good.

When stress becomes distress and then burnout

We all need stress, to some extent, just to get us out of bed in the morning because it both energises and motivates us. This *eustress* as Swenson calls it can be a positive drive to be creative and to perform to our best but when the level of stress becomes negative and destructive then it results in *distress*. If the level of stress increases and/or is over a sustained period of time, *hyper-stress*, it will begin to have detrimental effects physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually and result in *burnout*.

Freudenberger coined the term burnout in 1974 and defined it as “to deplete oneself, to exhaust one’s own physical and mental resources, to wear oneself out striving to reach some unrealistic expectation imposed by oneself or the values of society.”

Burnout is not an illness, but researchers have identified a collection of symptoms that come together, the following are the three major symptoms:-

1. A sense of being emotionally drained. There is no emotional energy left in the tank; the reserves have been drained. The person doesn’t care, doesn’t know what to do about it and the circumstances feel impossible to change.
2. A reduced sense of personal accomplishment. The person feels that hopes and dreams have not been realised and there is no hope for the future. There is a sense of failure and discouragement, especially when compared with the successes of others. Everything is seen as negative “the cup is always seen as half empty”.
3. A sense of depersonalisation, distance and disengagement in relationships. Instead of loving people and desiring to minister to them, there is a desire to withdraw and avoid them. There is a loss of desire to engage personally or even to sit and listen to them.

These three symptoms fuel a downward spiral in which the person feels out of control:-

Inefficiency > work harder > frustration > work harder > guilt > loss of perspective > everything feels a waste and a failure.

Warning lights that need attention:-

- An inability to say ‘no’. The desire to achieve and to be appreciated by others can lead to saying ‘yes’ to everything. The need to please people and to fulfil their expectations, out of a misplaced sense of duty, can lead to this boundary less way of operating.
- A need to succeed. This pressure can be both internal and external. Success is found in meeting standards of our own or of others. When God is no longer the one that we are seeking to please, we try to live up to the unrealistic goals of others and achievement becomes an idol.
- Losing sight of priorities. There will always be expectations and demands made on us. If goals and priorities are not clearly agreed, the pressure of trying to meet competing and unrealistic demands will cause burnout.
- Long working hours. Long working hours may be imposed or just the nature of the job, but sometimes they can be due to the person’s own driven-ness. As was illustrated by the downward spiral that characterises burnout, the person works harder and harder for longer and longer but with diminishing returns in efficiency.
- Lack of exercise and healthy habits. As work consumes more and more time and energy, healthy exercise and eating patterns start to slip. When unhealthy eating habits combines with lack of exercise and the person is so tired that the only form of leisure is to flop in front of the T.V. then sleep also becomes a problem. Add to this discouragement and guilt and there is a cycle that is hard to break.

- Loss of concentration and memory lapses can become a problem and contribute to diminishing efficiency and confidence.
- Character changes. There may be irritability, defensiveness and uncharacteristic outbursts of anger and frustration. There is often a loss of a sense of humour and a lack of fun, playfulness and laughter. There may be a tendency to anxiety or possibly phobias. Some people become inflexible, rigid in thought and behaviour, sometimes to the extent of obsessions.
- Health suffers as a result of lack of rest, sleep, exercise, poor eating habits and possible weight gain so that immunity is lowered and the person becomes prone to pick up infections easily. Some people resort to alcohol or drugs to try to control mood or to just dull the pain, which brings its own problems.

Dealing with burnout

Early intervention is necessary to reverse the downward spiral into burnout. When the 'warning lights' are seen, remedial action must be taken and not just be rationalised away. Friends and family may be the ones who become aware of the 'warning lights' and should be listened to. "Time out" needs to be taken:-

"Time out" for rest and refreshment, which may be days, weeks or even months depending on how bad it has become. Sometimes a short holiday just reveals how bad it is, because on returning nothing has changed.

"Time out" with family, supportive friends and colleagues; those who are life giving not draining.

"Time out" for prayer and bible study and for reading feeding books. Time to step back to contemplate and to take stock.

"Time out" to re-focus and to regain perspective. Time in a "safe place" away from the phone, the email and the usual demands of people. Time to pray, reflect and to read the Psalms. Time to walk in the park, kick the leaves or smell the roses. Time to pursue a favourite hobby. Time to enjoy your closest relationships in an unhurried way.

"Time out" to take responsibility for the patterns and habits of life that have contributed to the problem and to establish good habits of self-care.

Robert Murray McCheyne wrote "God gave me the gospel and a horse. Now I have worn out the horse and can no longer preach the gospel."

We have a responsibility to steward the health and strength that God has given us and to apply good principles of self-care physically, mentally, socially and spiritually, that we might not 'wear out the horse' so that we can continue to serve God and that we might finish the race well.

We need each other to finish the race

“Resilient people have come to appreciate the importance of travelling through life with a happy few, where there is a deep personal connectedness from which one derives continuous strength for the race.” (MacDonald p227)

We need the kinds of relationships which are intimate, where we are known, loved and accepted for who we are. This should include marriage, family and our closest friends. But we also need friends and colleagues who motivate us and encourage us to continue growing and being changed and will point out those issues that will hinder or entangle us and stop us finishing the race well.

At times we need a mentoring type relationship, with someone whom we can trust, be open and honest with and who has the spiritual wisdom to listen, to guide and to pray for us. But we also need those with whom we can enjoy fun and laughter, who we can relax with and not need an agenda to justify spending the time together.

We know that social isolation drains resilience and makes us vulnerable to loneliness, depression and despair as well as weakening our health and physical resilience. As believers we are uniquely placed to be part of a community that, at its best, should be caring for each other and especially the more vulnerable members. Small groups for bible study and prayer, ministry teams and prayer triplets are some of the ways that we can develop closer links.

We can also engage with others such as colleagues at work, in our neighbourhood, sports teams, night classes, singing in a choir or join a walking group. It takes a bit more effort, and courage in the second half of life to push the boundaries and get involved but it can have benefits both for us and also in the opportunities to serve others and to share our faith.

Paul the man who finished the race well

Paul was clear and whole hearted about his goal to finish the race, whatever the cost:-

“I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” Acts 20:23-24

Paul was willing to submit to the hard discipline that was needed to finish well and not to be tripped up, distracted or disqualified:-

“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to gain a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” 1 Corinthians 9:25-27

Paul knew the value of dealing with anything in the past that might hinder or burden his progress and to press on towards the goal with hope and perseverance:-

“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining to what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 3:13b-14

From his prison cell in Rome awaiting his imminent death, Paul was able to write with assurance, confidence and faith:-

“The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me on that day – and not to me only, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” 2 Timothy 4:7-8

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Questions for reflection:-

You may find that after two sessions on the subject of resilience it has not been possible to cover every relevant area in detail. If so, it may be helpful to look back at some of the previous material such as hope and perseverance, anxiety and fear, resolving conflict, learning contentment, seeking God, work and rest etc. which are all relevant to the subject.

1. Paul saw his life as having an ultimate goal, which motivated, sustained and gave him meaning and purpose, even in times of adversity and suffering.
 - a. How would you describe the ultimate goal of your life?
 - b. Does that goal give meaning and purpose to your life at present?
 - c. How does that goal help you to keep going in times of suffering?
2. Are there times when you have been stuck in self-defeating attitudes with regards to yourself or the circumstances you find yourself in? What does this reveal about your functional beliefs? What has helped you to change?
3. What scriptures have you found helpful in transforming your mind and the way you think about an issue?
4. If Catherine Haddow is correct that our strong emotions are a 'fire alarm' to alert us to the real loyalties of our heart i.e. what we worship, when you struggle with strong, overwhelming emotions leading to distress, what is that telling you about what you value most?
5. What threats to your sense of identity do you experience at this time in your life? How can you seek to live out of your identity in Christ?
6. How has God used times of adversity and suffering in your life? What effect has it had on your relationship with the Lord?
7. How do you reconcile your belief in the sovereignty of God with the difficulties and suffering that you or your loved ones face, especially when it seems impossible to see anything 'good' resulting from the situation?
8. What might it mean for you to "throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us"? Will this require addressing issues from the past?
9. Do any of the 'warning lights' of burnout resonate with you? Or do you struggle more to do with growing weary and losing heart?
10. We all know that we cannot go it alone in the Christian life. What changes do you need to make in your life both in taking time to develop deep friendships and in connecting with community in a meaningful way?

