Resilience in Ministry

Lecture delivered at the opening service of the new session of the Free Church College on 10th September 2007 by Rev Donald M MacDonald, Professor of Practical Theology

Resilience is a quality which is much sought after these days, both at the institutional and the personal levels. National and local government bodies aim to have services which are resilient in the face of crises such as flood, fire, epidemic or terrorism. Corporations run courses to produce a resilient management and workforce. Agencies which are dedicated to the care and education of children aim to produce resilient young people who can cope with the stresses and strains of life, some of which are sadly all too common and destructive these days. Resilience is the quality shown by elastic bodies of being stretched or compressed and then ‘leaping back’ to their former shape and size. Think of an elastic band. You stretch it and then when you release the tension it springs back to its previous size and shape. But notice that if it is stretched too far it will break, or if it is held at a stretch for a long time it loses its resilience and becomes brittle.

Applied figuratively, resilience is the quality which enables us to encounter the stresses and strains of life without either being torn apart or crushed and then to regain our equilibrium. The human person differs from the inanimate elastic band in several fairly obvious ways. First of all we are complex beings, made up of both body and spirit, expressing ourselves in several dimensions: physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, volitional and social. These are not watertight compartments and it is unhelpful to categorise stresses as in mainly the physical, the mental, the emotional or the spiritual realm and expect them to be dealt with at that one level only. Also we are constantly changing in response to the various experiences of life, from our earliest days onwards. They all leave a mark on us, whether for good or ill, and memory, both conscious and unconscious, plays its part in prolonging the effects of a particular experience either helpfully or unhelpfully. We learn good or bad patterns of responding to stressors and these tend to become habitual. Positive experience of stress will enable us to cope better with future stresses. Indeed we need a certain amount of stress to function properly.

The Lord told us that in this world we will have trouble and it is evident from the rest of the NT that this includes not only the troubles caused by opposition and persecution, but those which are common to human life. These include stress from workload, financial pressure, inter-personal relationships and life events such as change of job, change of home, illness and bereavement. It is well-known that when some of these events happen close together the stress is cumulative. Think of the experience of Job, that righteous man whom Satan attacked under God’s express permission, as one calamity followed another to leave him on the ash-heap.

While all believers are liable to Satan’s attacks, those who are engaged in full-time Christian service such as the pastoral ministry are particularly under fire. Statistics taken from different denominations show a high number of pastors who are experiencing the effects of stress in their ministry and some experience burnout or breakdown. How can we develop resilience to cope with the stresses of the ministry?
The experience of Paul the Apostle

We do not find the word resilience in the New Testament. However the idea is certainly there. Think of the apostle Paul. Several times, especially in the Corinthian letters, he details the sufferings that he has come through. For instance in 2 Corinthians 4:8 he says, “We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” Paul is like a boxer being knocked down repeatedly and then getting up again and again to continue the fight. If that’s not resilience, what is?

In the most comprehensive list of his sufferings, in 2 Corinthians 11, Paul enumerates the life-endangering situations he has faced at the hands of both Jews and Gentiles, during his travels and due to his hard work. He also mentions his conflict with false brothers and above all the unrelenting pressure of his pastoral concern for all the churches. Although this list bears some resemblance to the lists which Greek philosophers drew up to show their strength and serenity in the midst of trials and to depict themselves as models for others to follow, Paul rather uses his experience of suffering to show his weakness. His attitude is not one of stoic resignation, indifference to pain and suffering and a superior detachment from life’s trials. He feels the suffering deeply and therefore he can fully empathise with the suffering of others – “Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Corinthians 11:29)

He contrasts himself even more explicitly with the so-called super-apostles who cast aspersions on him because of his sufferings. They taught an unrealistic, triumphalist view of the Christian life. Paul boasts in the things that showed his weakness, not his strength. And then in 2 Corinthians 12 he relates his experience of the “thorn in his flesh.” God’s answer to his earnest requests for its removal was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul, therefore, gloried in his weakness shown by his suffering, because, as he said, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” The source of his resilience was God’s grace and power working in him.

What quality did God’s grace impart to Paul to enable him to overcome such sufferings? The NT word often used to describe this quality of keeping going when the going is tough means patient endurance or perseverance. For instance in Romans 5:4-5 Paul says, “… we rejoice in our sufferings, because suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” It is clear that perseverance is something that God gives through our experience of suffering and his purpose is to produce in us character – that is, character that has been tested and proved in the fires of affliction. So Paul rejoiced in his sufferings, not in any masochistic sense, but in the full realisation that Christ, who had suffered so much for him, was with him, that God’s purposes for him were good and loving, and that his character was being moulded into the likeness of Christ by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Paul was seemingly tireless – always travelling, always praying, always witnessing and often working with his own hands to support himself. It is apparent that this constant activity was at great personal cost. As well as receiving the strength that he needed through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, he also received comfort and encouragement from other believers. Paul was not a loner; he usually had at least one
co-worker with him and often several. He prized the fellowship, support and prayers of his colleagues and those to whom he ministered. We see this from the many greetings and personal references in his letters. For instance, in 2 Timothy 4, written probably towards the end of his life, he exhorts Timothy to make every effort to come to him quickly and to bring Mark with him because only Luke was with him to give him support. We too should find help and comfort in the fellowship of others.

He was also concerned for the welfare of his fellow workers. As well as exhorting Timothy to “watch your life (literally yourself) and doctrine closely”, he advises him to “use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.” He is obviously concerned not only for Timothy’s doctrine and moral character but his physical well-being also. In Acts 20:28 Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God …” They were to be shepherds to themselves as well as to the church of God. This pastoral responsibility includes attention to the physical and material needs of the flock as well as their spiritual nurture. So, also, ministers are to have a pastoral concern for their own welfare as individuals and as a group. Presbytery should be the forum through which this pastoral support is exercised.

**Take responsibility for yourself**

How are we to watch over our own welfare as those who are entrusted with ministering to others so that we will be resilient in the face of all the attacks of the world, the flesh and the Devil? We must take responsibility for ourselves. Of course the church has a responsibility to ensure that living and working conditions, including remuneration, accommodation, workload, holidays, etc, are optimal, for “the labourer is worthy of his hire”; but our resilience does not depend on these external factors. Secular writers on resilience talk about qualities such as self-control, self-esteem and hope as being basic to producing resilient young people. The first and last of these are readily recognisable as Christian virtues, although we have a different source and motive power from the secularist to produce self-control and hope.

But what about self-esteem? Surely anything that smacks of glorifying self is forbidden to Christians? Well, it depends what you mean by self-esteem. Where do we get our identity and sense of self? Usually this is based on our background, our family and upbringing, including our education and training and, in Scotland particularly, our occupation. “What do you do?” is usually the first thing people ask us. Most people have no idea what a minister does. Does he have a real job? I well remember our neighbour’s four-year old child coming into our house one day and, finding me sitting at my desk in my study, asking, “What are you doing?” “I’m working”, I replied. She looked at me rather doubtfully and said, “My daddy goes out to work.” I couldn’t really be doing a proper job!

For the Christian, our identity and therefore our self-esteem is derived from our relationship with God in Christ. In him we are new creations, precious to him, with a new identity as children of God, a new relationship as part of his covenant people, the church, a new power for living and a new destiny. Paul often seemed to denigrate himself as the chief of sinners and the least of the apostles, but he could also say, “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Corinthians 15:10) and “for to me to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21). He regarded himself as a “man in Christ” and that was the
basis for his identity and self-worth. It was this confidence in the God who had called him to suffer great things for the kingdom that gave Paul his resilience in face of almost unbearable stress. We are children of the king, indeed we are his ambassadors and representatives, and our identity and self-esteem do not rest on what we are in ourselves but what we are in him.

Some might say that I’m giving a very negative and discouraging picture of Christian ministry by focusing on the problem of stress. However, I believe it is so important that those in training should prepare themselves as far as possible to cope with stress. Student life has its own stresses – financial hardship, workload, assignments, deadlines, exams, and preaching practice, to name but a few – and the time in College should be seen as a training ground in this area as well as in the academic and practical. Much has been written about the factors which cause stress in the pastoral ministry: the conflict between high expectations and the seeming lack of achievement leading to frustration and a feeling of failure, the open-ended nature of the work with no fixed hours and yet recurring deadlines, the dangers of overwork on the one hand and laziness on the other, the danger of isolation, difficulties with interpersonal relationships with elders and colleagues, the danger of neglect of family and so on. We look at these issues in more detail in Practical Theology 2, but I would like to highlight a few important points about dealing with stress now.

Know yourself
First of all we should know ourselves. I’m taking for granted that we are growing in our knowledge of God in Christ. But remember we have this treasure in jars of clay – and that refers to the weakness of our human nature, not just our bodies. We should gain insight into our personality type, how we make decisions, how we interact with other people, how we deal with conflict. While it is true that our basic personality, which is produced by the interplay of our genetic inheritance with our upbringing and early experience, does not change all that much throughout life, this gives us no excuse for not using the resources God has given us to deal with the problem areas in our lives and to grow to maturity. Producing Christian character is the great aim of the Christian life. God’s purpose in saving us is to glory himself by producing Christ-like character in us. This does not mean that we will all become clones with all individual characteristics removed. There is room for all personality types – the introvert as well as the extravert, the emotional as well as the cerebral, the intuitive as well as the factual, and the various possible combinations of these. The important thing is, in reliance on Christ, to recognise and control our strengths and understand and deal with our weaknesses. At the same time we gain insight into why other people act and react the way they do and why we interact with them the way we do. We should also learn to recognise the early signs of unhelpful responses to stress and take corrective action.

What then are these signs? In acutely stressful situations we are all aware of the effects of stress: the body pumps out adrenaline which prepares us for the classical “flight or fight” response: our mind becomes alert, our mouth is dry, our heart rate and breathing increases, blood circulation is rerouted from our skin and internal organs to our muscles to prepare us for action. All very useful if we have to fight to defend ourselves or run away to save our lives! But if we have to address an audience or deal with an unpleasant personal situation, we have to learn ways of counteracting the dry mouth, relaxing the tense muscles and harnessing the heightened state of
alertness. When we respond repeatedly to all stressful situations like this the body is over-stimulated. The result is heightened tension, producing irritability, headaches, feeling washed out, inability to concentrate, changes in digestion and sleep pattern and so on. To begin with, there is frenetic activity to try to cope and then eventually there is disengagement, loss of enjoyment in work, and burnout. This may also be associated with depressive illness at any stage. Remedial action should be taken as early as possible.

**Care for yourself**

Because these effects are so devastating on our lives, our families and our flocks, we should learn to care for ourselves. But doesn’t this contradict the need for cross-bearing and self-denial? Isn’t it better “to burn out than rust out”? But God has designed us to have a pattern of activity punctuated with times of rest – the Sabbath principle. Our Lord said to his disciples when they were so busy that they had no time to eat, “Come apart with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” If we don’t rest, we will certainly come apart! Because Sunday is the minister’s busiest day, he needs another day of rest. And part of that rest should be to spend time with spouse and family if any. Christ’s demand that not even family ties should come in the way of our following him gives us no warrant for neglect of family. Also there is the need to go apart with Christ to feed our own souls. Of course we have access to him at any time, but we also need regular times of waiting on him to renew our strength.

Then there is the need for good diet, regular physical exercise, sufficient sleep and attention to physical health. Denial of the flesh does not mean ignoring our legitimate bodily needs. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and we must take care of it. For too long ministers have followed the AV translation of 1 Timothy 4:8, “For bodily exercise profiteth little”, and looked down on physical exercise as unspiritual and a waste of time. However Paul is not condemning physical exercise out of hand – it is of some value. Rather he is contrasting the teaching that being hard on the body is the best way to spiritual maturity with true piety or godliness. Whether that exercise is to be by organised sport, a workout in the gym, running, walking, swimming or energetic gardening, will be largely a matter of taste and practicality. Remember that in Paul’s day everyday life was full of strenuous physical activity and he did not alternate between sitting at a desk and in a driving seat! As well as the good effect exercise has on our heart function, there is no doubt that healthy physical exercise and fresh air help towards a good sleep pattern, which in turn helps the body, and particularly the brain, to recover from the effects of stress. We should also learn the technique of completely relaxing physically and mentally at any time, even for short periods, to prevent the build-up of unhelpful stress responses.

**Discipline yourself**

We should also discipline ourselves. Self-discipline includes the best possible use of the time God has given us – time-management. This is a skill to be learned – to find out our best pattern of functioning, planning our schedule and yet not being bound to it so rigidly that we have no time for people or for the unexpected crisis. We must learn to say “No” to protect ourselves from being overstretched. We are to be good stewards of the manifold grace of God, and one of his gifts to us is time. Paul often likens the Christian life to the athlete training for the games. This demands single-minded concentration and effort to control oneself and push oneself to the limit to win the prize. In 1 Corinthians 9, in which Paul insists both on his right to support as an
apostle and his freedom to deny himself that support for the sake of the gospel and to become all things to all men to win some, he ends by declaring that he disciplines his body and makes it his slave so that, having preached to others, he may not be disqualified. How do we square that with what I have said about taking care of the body? Well, there’s a difference between caring for oneself and self-indulgence. Think of the athletes in the recent World Athletics Championships or the rugby players in the World Cup going on at the moment. They spend a lot of time, effort and self-sacrifice to reach the peak of physical and mental fitness. They both care for their bodies and discipline themselves and then go out and lay themselves on the line. We have a much greater goal in view, which demands even greater discipline and self-sacrifice.

Dealing with people
In pastoral ministry people matter more than anything else. How do you deal with interpersonal conflict? This is one of the main causes of stress in the ministry. It is a huge subject and we cannot deal with it at the moment. Remember this is nothing new. Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement about whether to take John Mark with them on their second missionary journey (Acts 14:36-41). I think it’s pointless to ask who was in the right or who was to blame for the disagreement. The important point is that they found a win-win solution to the problem. Paul got a reliable companion in Silas and went on to pioneer in new territory for the gospel, while Barnabas took Mark to the more protected environment of Cyprus and no doubt mentored him for what would be his important life’s work, writing his gospel of Christ. Later, as we have seen, Paul had the grace to call for Mark to come to him in prison as one who would be helpful for his ministry. We have to learn to be assertive without being aggressive, to listen without interrupting and make decisions after open and prayerful discussion, all in an atmosphere of unconditional love. We may also find it useful to have someone with whom to talk over things confidentially, whether one’s spouse or a trusted colleague.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:20, “stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.” In the context Paul is criticising the Corinthians for their misuse of the gift of tongues and their disorderly worship. They thought they were being very spiritual because of their spectacular spiritual gifts, but Paul disabuses them of that. Our theology should make a difference to the way we think and this in turn will modify our behaviour. We have the mind of Christ, so, by his grace, let us develop Christ-like thinking, character and behaviour.

Much can be done to prepare ourselves for dealing with stress and becoming more resilient. But sometimes the stress will be too much for our feeble frames. There is no disgrace in being what Dr Margery Foyle calls ‘honourably wounded’ (the title of her helpful book) – that is, disabled in some way, physically or mentally, in the Lord’s service. And remember failure is not final. Dr Foyle in her recently published autobiography, Can It Really Be Me?, tells of her breakdown due to stress while working as a medical missionary in India and of her recovery to become a psychiatrist and an acknowledged expert on the effects of stress among cross-cultural workers. She was still travelling the world lecturing, doing research and helping others well into her eighties! Those who have such experiences are better able to understand and counsel others.
So commit yourselves joyfully to the work God has called you to. He is faithful. He will not allow you to be tested beyond what you are able to bear. Remember that the ability to bear up under the stress of testing comes from him. Make full use of all the resources he makes available to us in common and in special grace: the insights of psychology and medicine certainly, and most of all the work of the Holy Spirit through God’s Word and the fellowship of the church.

**Helpful Books**

Peter Brain, *Going the Distance: How to Stay Fit for a Lifetime of Ministry*, Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2004


Chris Williams, Paul Richards and Ingrid Whitton, *I’m Not Supposed to Feel Like This: A Christian Self-help Approach to Depression and Anxiety*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2002