

Building Resilience

Resilience is often offered as a catch-all solution to many of the pressures we face – if only the children, teachers, or budget were more resilient. It's a pervasive concept. From Latin roots, we draw the English verb “to resile” – meaning ‘to return to the same place’, to ‘spring back’, or ‘return to normal’. However, the word itself can feel quite uninspiring – easily reduced to just determination, grit, hanging in there, or getting through. Such an important concept merits some consideration of how it is built up in leaders who are seeking to sustain their vision.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul shares very vulnerably about the source of his resilience and his hope, which starts by acknowledging the challenges, writing “we were under pressure, far beyond our ability to cope” (2 Corinthians 1:8) and then later, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). He shares physical challenges (hunger, thirst, lack of sleep, pain) and yet finds these are an opportunity for growth and blessing, acknowledging the promise of God that “my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:8).

This is the upside-down ecology of God's kingdom, where in our weakness we can become strong, and in our humility we grow deeper roots. It trusts Jesus, who offers “life in all its fullness” yet shows the ultimate vulnerability in suffering. He fails to fulfil contemporary expectations of a dominant warrior Messiah, rather fulfilling the description of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53: “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him... a man of suffering,

and familiar with pain.” In another of Paul's letters, to the church in Rome, he traces the deep interconnection between key elements – “we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5:3-5)

Jesus' offer of “life in all its fullness” is not rose-tinted or naïve. The Christian life does not offer exemption from challenge, or removal of suffering. Rather it gives us a lens through which to see our challenges, and recognises that in our most challenging or painful times, God is at work in us, both as individuals and teams – guiding, strengthening, refining and re-focusing us, enabling us to bounce back stronger. In *The Road to Character*, David Brooks writes: “Most people shoot for happiness, but feel formed through suffering... Suffering, like love, shatters the illusion of self-mastery... [and] oddly teaches gratitude.” (Brooks 2015: 93-94)

Leaders who are seeking to build resilience in themselves and their teams can reflect deeply on this counter-cultural model of leadership, based on servanthood and suffering. While school leaders may not face the same physical persecution, fear, imprisonment or beatings that Paul experienced, they will daily be confronted with severe challenges to their resilience – disciplinaries, budget cuts, complaints, safeguarding tragedies, exclusions, accountability – and a Christian understanding of resilience is that God is at work in the challenge, re-shaping us and further developing our character, building our hope, and sustaining our vision.

1. From where do you get your resilience as a leader?
2. How might you define resilience in your organisation? What practical strategies or experiences do you think help to build resilience in teams? Is it the same for adults and children?
3. How does the Christian narrative help us to deal with disappointment? What kind of lens or perspective does your understanding of God bring?
4. Are there circumstances where you have experienced the need to rely on God? How has this affected your leadership journey?