



Resilience in Ministry

Four keys to persevering as
a church leader

John Benton

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CONTENTS

	Page number
Introduction	3
1. Facing down reality	5
2. Seeing God's purpose	10
3. Being creative	15
4. How you see yourself	20

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Introduction

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith, 2 Timothy 4.7. That is what we all want to say about our lives as Christian leaders. Some men sadly fall by the wayside. But Paul, the apostle, didn't. He kept going. Through all the troubles and temptations and hard tasks – he persisted. He took many cuts and blows – emotional and physical. He was wounded many times. He was in a spiritual battle. But he was resilient.

What is resilience? These days we think of resilience as being simply tough and hardwearing. But the original root of the word means rather more than that. It basically means the ability to recover form after being squeezed, or to bounce back. It doesn't mean that you never get knocked down or crushed in ministry. But it means that you regroup; you get up again.

We see a literal version of this in Paul's work in Lystra: *Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered round him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe,* Acts 14.19-20. That was a literal getting up again – for us it is bouncing back spiritually and emotionally so that we carry on with our work for Christ.

The word resilient is not in Scripture – but the word 'resurrection' certainly is. The Greek – *anastasis* – literally means 'stand up again'. So, resilience is not about an inner strength which means we can tough it out whatever happens – sometimes we do get knocked down – we must not fool ourselves. But with God's help, we get up again. If you have been knocked back as a leader, you need not think that is the end of ministry. It is a common experience for God's servants. But by God's grace you can pick yourself up and start again.

The consequence of resilience is, of course, endurance and that is so important for ministry today. Quite often ministries only become fruitful after a length of time. Here are a few situations which might particularly require hanging in for a long time before the church is blessed.

- We may start in a new situation. Local people view us with suspicion perhaps because they don't know us. But after a time of seeing our faithfulness and hopefully kindness, they come to trust us. Then they start taking notice of us. Perhaps non-Christians in the area are suspicious of

health and wealth, prosperity preachers who are simply after their money. But after some years maybe, they see we are not like that – so they begin to listen. They see you are a good human being who has got something to offer. So, to keep going in ministry if we possibly can is very important.

- Perhaps you have been called to pick up the reins in a church which has had some kind of scandal and has crashed. It has a bad reputation in the locality. It will often take quite a long time, maybe decades, to live that bad reputation down. Regaining trust takes time.
- Sometimes, the Lord calls his servants to go and repair a broken church. For all kinds of reasons – most of them bad – churches split. It may be over things like styles of worship, or the leadership falling out with each other, or a heresy which some in the church recognise and others do not. To pick up the pieces in such a situation and enable the group to repent (if necessary), regain confidence and move forward is unlikely to happen overnight. Persistence is needed and that requires resilience.

In this booklet, my aim is to share 4 keys which I think are important to being resilient in ministry. They are: Facing Down Reality; Seeing God's Purpose; Being Intentionally Creative and How we see ourselves. Under God, I hope this will be helpful and that these keys will unlock doors for pastors to keep going in ministry.

1: Facing down reality

The reality is that Christian ministry is mostly difficult. It is rarely easy. No matter what the situation, it is never easy to pastor a church of sinners when you too are a sinner. It is not easy to nurture a church in an environment which is in rebellion against God. It is not easy to be an ambassador for the kingdom of light in a world of darkness where Satan has power, 2 Corinthians 5.20.

When things are continually difficult, we get discouraged and we are tempted to give up. Or we are lured into telling ourselves and other people lies about how well things are going. I have come across some pastors who have escaped reality and live in a fantasy world of self-deceit that all is well when it isn't.

Instead of avoiding the truth, we need to look it squarely in the eye and overcome it. How do we do that? We do it with God and with the gospel. We do it by God's grace, 2 Timothy 2.1. Let me sketch out three crucial areas where, the Lord helping us, we might need to face down reality, overcome it and push past it.

- *Circumstances*

You might be called to minister in a less than helpful situation. For example, when my wife, Ann, and I first came to Guildford in 1980, the church was mostly older people. There were a few young families (often the lifeblood of a church). And one of those left during the first year due to a job move, (how that knocked us back!) The chapel was old and not very nice to invite people to. Furthermore, in the town there were at least two big evangelical churches – one Anglican, one charismatic, which were thriving and very popular. That was the reality. It was quite depressing. What do you do with that kind of set of circumstances? You face the reality, look to God and pray.

The great example of facing down reality by faith in God, is Abraham. *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be'. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness,'* Romans 4.18-22.

Abraham faced reality. He did not go around pretending he was still a virile young man. He knew and faced the circumstances. But he believed God. What God had promised, he would perform. He looked past the circumstances in faith. And often we must do the same, the Holy Spirit helping us.

There are many other situations and stories like this in our Bibles. Here we can only briefly refer to a couple of instances:

Are you in a situation which seems too hard to crack? Jericho was like that for Joshua. *Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in*, Joshua 6.1. But God had promised, Joshua, *No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life...Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go*, Joshua 1.5, 9. And looking to the Lord, the uncrackable city fell. Faith looks past the circumstances to God's promises.

Are you in a set of circumstances where in some way the gospel is under attack? We are like that here in UK with all the secular media ranged against Bible Christianity. People scorn us Christians and our churches. We are like Jerusalem under siege in Hezekiah's day. And if you remember the story, you will recall how the Assyrian field commander stood outside the city and derided God and his people. (Perhaps you have that situation literally, where people stand outside your church building with wry smiles on their faces as the 'stupid' Christians enter to worship). But Hezekiah, with the help of Isaiah the prophet, sees past the circumstances and looks to God, and the mighty Assyrian army crumbles, Isaiah 36, 37.

And Jesus has promised his servants, no matter what the circumstances, *I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit*, John 15.5.

- *Sin*

Sometimes we are discouraged and on the point of giving up because of the terrible reality of our own sin, 1 Timothy 1.15. Perhaps a pastor feels so under pressure with people and problems and with so little help that he foolishly tries to take comfort in some sin. Then his conscience roars at him, 'How can God possibly put up with you? How can God use you?' He feels he must do some kind of 'penance' because he is a pastor and not just an ordinary sinner to make up for his failure. He has forgotten Christ and grace.

Sometimes it is because the church a pastor is serving wants ‘value for money’ and so a conscientious pastor begins to neglect unseen time with God to be refreshed by grace and concentrate on ministry that it seen – so that he is seen not to be slacking. ‘It’s works that count’ is the message the pastor has unconsciously imbibed, and he topples over into a legalistic mentality, which destroys any honest man’s confidence. Then he concludes: ‘This is too much for me. I’m joyless. I might as well indulge myself in some sin or other.’ (There are the pleasures of sin for a season, Hebrews 11.25 – a short time). And his conscience is red raw with guilt and he feels like giving up. But no. Stop sinning and carry on. God has grace for sinners – grace for failing pastors, 2 Timothy 2.1.

Listen to Martin Luther: ‘A Christian is both righteous and a sinner, an enemy of God yet a child of God. These contraries no sophister will admit for they know not the manner of justification. But we teach and comfort the afflicted sinner in this manner: ‘Brother it is not possible for thee to become so righteous in this life that thou should feel no sin at all...’

But thou wilt say: ‘How can I be holy when I feel sin in me?’ I answer in that thou dost feel and acknowledge thy sin, it is a good token: give thanks to God and despair not. It is one step to health when the sick man acknowledges his infirmity. ‘But how shall I be delivered from sin?’ Run to Christ, the physician that healeth them that are broken in heart, and saveth sinners. If thou believe thou art righteous for thou giveth glory unto God...and that sin that remaineth in thee is not laid to thy charge, but is pardoned for Christ’s sake in whom thou believest, who is perfectly just: whose righteousness is your righteousness, and thy sin took upon himself.’¹

There is grace for the pastor’s failures and the pastor’s sins. You’ve fallen. But get up again. Resilience.

- *Hurts*

The reality is that not only do we sin but we get sinned against – and it hurts. It hurts especially if it comes from other Christians. And the temptation is to become bitter – very bitter. You might carry on – but it’s not out of love for the Lord – but kind of to vindicate yourself (I kept going! Despite what they did to me!).

Forgiveness is never easy – don’t pretend it is. But if we are not going to be

¹ *Commentary on Galatians*, on ch 3v6, Kregel Publications, 1979, page 130

eaten up with bitterness then we must find a way to forgive, Ephesians 4.32. We can find a way with God and the gospel.

The reason we should forgive one another in the church is, of course, the gospel. Through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross our sins have been justly dealt with, Romans 3.25, 26 and therefore the holy God is able to justly forgive us, 1 John 1.9.

The parable in Matthew 18:21-35, teaches us that having been forgiven it is incumbent upon us to forgive others. A servant who has been forgiven a huge debt has no place in demanding that the small debts of others *must* be paid. It simply will not do.

If God could sacrifice his righteous anger for us to be forgiven, then surely, we (sinners) must do the same when others sin against us.

Having said that, nevertheless, most of us still find it hard to forgive others – especially when they have hurt us. We may put up a show of 'niceness' but our hearts are still vengeful, or we simply try to avoid them. This is not how Jesus wants us to handle things. We find it hard to forgive for at least three reasons.

- *Justice:* We feel (rightly) it is simply not fair that people get away with what they have done. But remember God is the judge (not us) and he will inevitably deal justly. If that person is a Christian, Jesus has paid the debt to justice due for their sins. Can you look into the eyes of Jesus and demand, 'I want more'? If the person who has sinned against you is not a Christian, though you are right to be angry, realize that God says, 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay,' Romans 12.19. Therefore, forgive and leave it with God.
- *Pride:* Very often the root of our failure to forgive is our own pride – and pride is a sin, 2 Timothy 2.2. We are meant to follow Christ in humility, 1 Peter 2.21-23.
- *Blindness:* To hold on to the accusations is to be like Satan, the great accuser. But to forgive is to imitate God, Ephesians 4.32-5.1. We can be blind to the opportunity God is giving us to become more like him. Let's take the opportunity by forgiving as he forgives.

If someone asks for forgiveness, forgive them in a gracious and loving way, Luke 15.22-24. Ask God to make you more acquainted with the depth and horror of

your own sin and how much you have been forgiven. Continually reminding one another of God's great love in the gospel will help us.

We face down the hurts with God's help by the gospel. And often that will need to be a daily exercise of your soul – until you forget all about it.

2: Seeing God's purpose

Keeping going in ministry is not just about overcoming the negatives – facing down the challenges which reality throws at us. On its own that would make for a fairly grim existence which would probably wear us out in the end, and we would give up.

Resilience feeds on positives. There must be hope and vision. There must be a sense that what we are spending our life on, is really worthwhile. Enthusiasm, joy and stickability come from a sense of purpose – especially God's purpose.

Sometimes pastors gain their momentum from the way a ministry is prospering with people being converted. That is understandable. But what happens when it is not like that? What about when the going is hard? The great prophet Isaiah was told from the beginning of his work that it would not be a success either numerically or by way of popularity, Isaiah 6.11-13. The ministries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel were equally difficult, Jeremiah 1.18, 19; Ezekiel 3.26, 27. But these men were able to push through the troubled times in which they lived.

A crucial key to keeping going when everything is an uphill struggle is knowing we are being used for God's own purposes. What greater privilege can there be than to be chosen as an instrument in God's hands. Here are three elements to having an awareness of divine purpose in your ministry.

The call of God

My own entry into the pastorate was accompanied by a deep sense of call. I had been exercised in my soul for many months with a feeling that I must do something with my life for the cause of Christ. I didn't know quite where to turn. Then, I was asked to preach at a church in the south of England and my wife Ann accompanied me. Though my sermons that Lord's Day as an inexperienced preacher were pretty unremarkable, it was a remarkable day. God somehow spoke to Ann and I. As we drove away that Sunday evening, we looked at each other and said, 'we are going there, aren't we'. At that point the church did not know. But within nine months I had been installed as the pastor. We were there for 36 years, and God grew the church.

That sense of God's call was of immense value during the tough times – especially in the early years of ministry. When painful attacks and heart-breaking situations arose, we were able to find huge comfort in the thought that 'We did

not put ourselves here. God put us here and therefore he will provide'. We knew the Lord had a purpose for us which he would bring to pass. It made us resilient. It spurred us on and kept us going.

I know that in some quarters of evangelicalism the idea of the call is played down. This work of the Holy Spirit is skated over. That is a mistake. An awareness of calling gives a huge sense of purpose to one's ministry.

And, of course, we find just this in the stories of the great men of Scripture. Isaiah persevered through all the opposition and apathy because a call had come to him from the throne of God, *Go and tell these people...* Isaiah 6.9. The apostle Paul was full of ongoing fervour, warmth and passion in his ministry for Christ, despite the beatings and imprisonments, partly because of the mighty call he had received from Christ on the Damascus Road: *I am sending you to (the Gentiles) to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified through faith in me,* Acts 26. 17, 18.

The calls of Isaiah and Paul may have been extraordinary. But nevertheless, every true pastor has a call from God. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us a desire for ministry and equips us with suitable gifts, Acts 20.28. Real church leaders do not appoint themselves. God has a hand in it. *First*, when a man examines himself and digs deep into what is prompting him in the direction of ministry, he is bound to find some things that should not be there. We are fallen sinners. But nevertheless, as he sifts through his motives, he does find a sincere and reverential concern for Christ and his cause and an inner pressure from the Holy Spirit to serve. *Second*, this inner conviction is confirmed as valid by the church recognising that the man has the gifts and graces required of a church leader in Scripture.

No two calls to ministry are exactly the same. They will usually include various providences and experiences which, under God's hand, confirm our calling. But the inward call in the heart and the outward call of the church are the two essentials.

From time to time, it is a good exercise for a pastor to prayerfully remind himself of his call. Perhaps he should think through and write a short account of what happened when, and then reflect on the turning points. Follow that up by thanking God for the astonishing privilege of being chosen to be a servant of the living God. God has his hand upon you. He has a purpose for your life. This brings

resilience.

Your place in God's plan

The apostle Paul showed resilience. What fed into his endurance was his sense of his own place in God's redemptive plans for a lost world. He mentions this, directly and indirectly, in many of his writings. Perhaps one of the most obvious places is at the beginning of his letter to Titus: *Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness – a faith and hope resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Saviour...*' Titus 1.1-3.

This applies in a very special way to Paul. But it also has meaning for us. Notice four things here which magnify the reality of what we are involved in as pastors.

- *God's plan is eternal*

The divine design is for lost men and women to be forgiven and find eternal life in Christ, John 3.16. When all the business deals, artistic and sporting achievements and politics of high-flying friends are over they eventually mean nothing. This world will pass away. But what you are involved in as a preacher of God's word, will never pass away. Your preaching, under the blessing of the Holy Spirit, takes people to heaven.

- *God's plan is urgent*

The truth leads to godliness and the ungodliness of the world shows that they are living by a lie. They have been deceived by the world, the flesh and the devil and that deception will take them to hell unless they find Christ, 2 Thessalonians 1.8-10. That means that the pastor / preacher's work could not be more important.

- *God's plan is certain*

The pastor is not involved in a work that might fail. It will not be that our labours will ultimately be in vain, 1 Corinthians 15.58. God has his elect. They will certainly come to Christ and so be saved. Christ is risen from the dead and has all power in heaven and on earth. He cannot fail. So, pastor, you are not on a fool's errand.

- *You serve God's plan*

Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles. He is aware that he is the instrument of God's purposes to save his people. Of course, we do not have the exalted position which was given to Paul. But all pastor / preachers have the privilege of being instruments in the Redeemer's hands. Like Jeremiah and Paul and all God's servants you were chosen before you were born to take part in fulfilling the grand design of God, Jeremiah 1.5; Galatians 1.15. God's people will be saved and you are an instrument through which they will come.

Recognise and reflect on your part in this great purpose. In this sense, do not have a low view of who you really are, pastor.

Furthermore, this sense of purpose should be reinforced as we see what God is doing in the world today. Despite man's best efforts, we see the world becoming increasingly lawless and depraved. The Bible predicts this and the Bible is not wrong. Furthermore, although we see the increasing persecution of Christians, nevertheless the gospel continues to spread and be believed across the world, just as Jesus said it would, Matthew 24.14. This plan is not a theoretical, theological construct. It is actuality.

God's servants are promised great reward

The story is told of a missionary who had finished his ministry abroad returning to his home country. As he got off the boat, he saw a fellow passenger who was being applauded and greeted by a large cheering crowd of well-wishers. But there was no-one to greet the missionary. He wondered, momentarily, what he had done with his life. There he was with no one. But then, it was as if the Lord said to him: 'Yes. But wait and see. Your welcome party isn't here – it is in heaven'.

God, through the apostle John, assures us: *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*, Revelation 21.4

And throughout the NT we find promises, not just of peace but of great reward for God's faithful servants. Their labours will not be in vain. There is a purpose for your own good – a great reward eternally for you personally.

Paul writes: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*, Romans 8.18. Our reward will make our

our sufferings seem like a speck of dust on the scales.

Further Paul tells us (using a tinge of irony): *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us a weight of glory that far outweighs them all*, 2 Corinthians 4.17. Not only is the glory greater than our troubles, but the troubles we go through for Christ actually work for us a greater reward. Here is what God is doing.

And, of course, as he comes towards the end of his life, Paul's great statement is: *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 to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing*, 2 Timothy 4.7-8. This applies not just to the apostle, but to us.

Such rewards are to be taken seriously by God's servants. Here is something that spurs us on to be resilient.

3: Being creative

We have seen that resilience includes facing down the apparent reality (through faith in God) and having a deep sense of God given purpose which inspires us to keep going and to know that we can rely on the Lord for all that needs to happen. But there is another ingredient of which we need to take careful notice. Resilience will be strengthened by being intentionally creative.

What do I mean by being intentionally creative? I mean being given insight to know how you can turn your circumstances to good – even when they seem to be the worst. When you can do that, you feel not so much oppressed under the weight of your circumstances but on top of them. You are not being pushed around by the circumstances but rather pushing them to serve the Lord and his plans.

Two stories

Here are two true stories which will enable you to see practically the kind of thing I have in mind.

Nancy

When I first arrived in Guildford to begin ministry, we had a missionary in France. There he had married a Belgium girl, Nancy. For reasons which I won't go into they were forced – I think rather unfairly – to return from the field and settle back in Guildford. This itself was a challenge to cope with. Then, after a few years sadly, Nancy began to lose her hearing – eventually she went almost totally deaf.

It was an enormous set-back for her. It made communicating with folk in the church difficult and home group was extremely tricky with everyone speaking at once. She was in a really challenging place. We felt very sorry for her and prayed for her a lot.

But then with her various treatments and support from medical services she began to see what had happened to her in a totally different way. God was introducing her to a whole new set of people. She had become part of a different and largely unreached community. She was getting to know deaf people and because she was deaf too, those people related to her and became her friends. Soon Nancy was inviting many of those people around to her house, where she and her husband would put on nice food and entertainments suitable for those who had lost their hearing. At Christmas and Easter she would have special parties which people really enjoyed and the gospel was preached.

She had creatively embraced the situation, intentionally turning it to good. It was a way of following Paul's instructions to *make the most of every opportunity*, Colossians 4.5. She could have just been full of self-pity and got depressed, but instead she joyfully took the situation by the scruff of the neck and used it for Christ. Do you see what I'm talking about? It even made Nancy feel there was a purpose from God in it all.

Corrie Ten Boom

Here is a much more famous example. Perhaps you have read the book *The Hiding Place* which recounts the experiences of the Dutch clockmaker Corrie Ten Boom in WWII. You remember she and her family hid Jewish people and partisans from the Nazi forces in their home. Eventually they were caught. She and her sister Betsie were incarcerated in Ravensbruck concentration camp for women (I think NW of Berlin).

The place was absolutely terrible. It was filthy and the huts were so infested with lice that the Nazi guards would not enter. Corrie and Betsie saw their chance. Where could they run a Bible study for women which would be undisturbed by the guards? Why right there in the hut where the guards feared to come! So that's what they did. And despite the lice many women started coming to be given hope and faith as they heard of Jesus and his eternal love in those dreadful circumstances. They used their situation creatively to bless others. You get the idea.

Do the Scriptures teach anything like this?

I think the answer is 'Yes'. Let me take you through a few examples.

- *Paul*

So, Philippians is written from prison – and the reference to the palace guard (1.13) probably indicates he is in prison in Rome (not definite) circa AD61. On the surface the apostle being in prison was a great hindrance to the spread of the gospel. But Paul says, *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 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*, 1.12-14. Paul sees the situation as the opportunity to preach to the soldiers who guard him – he has a captive audience with whom he can take his time talking about the Lord Jesus Christ. Notes in the *NIV Study Bible* say of the whole palace guard – 'a contingent of soldiers numbering several thousand, many of whom would have had

personal contact with Paul or would have been assigned individually to guard him during the course of his imprisonment.’ Paul did not accept the situation at face value but used the circumstances for the gospel. And his creative embracing of the situation stirred up others to share the gospel too.

The Babylonian exiles

In Jeremiah 29.4-12 we have a letter which God had told the prophet to send to those who had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon.

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers you will prosper.’ Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says, ‘Do not let the prophets and diviners among us you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams they encourage you to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my Name. I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD. This is what the LORD says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and will fulfil my gracious promise to you to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and pray to me, and I will listen to you...’

Here are people who have become refugees under an oppressive dictatorship. They are exiles in a foreign land. It would be easy for them to simply feel sorry for themselves and blame and curse the kings of Judah who had not looked to the Lord and by their foolish political alliances had provoked Babylon and got them into this mess. But God himself tells them not to do that. They are to see the parallel with the Israelites in Egypt and increase in number rather than decrease. They are to settle down, v5, plant gardens and, v7, instead of trying terrorist tactics against their captors, to seek the peace and prosperity of Babylon – and wait God’s time for return, v10.

And with just such an attitude, Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, are given marvellous opportunities to witness for the Lord. In fact, Scripture indicates that in the end Nebuchadnezzar himself was converted after his humbling, Daniel 4.37. There is a desire to do good to Babylon instead of harm, opportunities open up – even in that totalitarian state. This is an

encouragement to us to be creative and see how we can do good to our communities – even if they are hostile, Galatians 6.10.

And this kind of thing was followed through in the early church. How did they first begin to commend themselves to their communities in the early centuries? The answer is as burial societies. In harsh Roman times people were just left for dead on the street – at the mercy of dogs and carrion birds. The early church thought ‘they may not have been Christians, but they are made in the image of our God. Let’s honour him by caring for them in death.’ Such actions brought glory to Christ and openings for the gospel resulted.

- *Gideon*

We may feel small and inadequate. God had purposely exacerbated that in Gideon. He did this by reducing Gideon’s army to just 300 men. How are they going to really make the Amalekites panic and run? Gideon is given a very creative idea, *Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside*, Judges 7.16. 300 with trumpets, jars and flaming torches. All is quiet in the Amalekite camp, but suddenly the lights go on and there is the sound of 300 trumpets and a fearsome battle cry – ‘A sword for the Lord and Gideon!’, Judges 7.20. Pandemonium breaks out and spreads throughout the enemy camp – they start killing one another – victory is won.

Of course, God himself is the great author of creation and creativity – so these kinds of ideas often come to us as we wait upon God, bring the situation to him, meditate on it and seek his glory.

Resources?

But that also brings us to another aspect of this.

Very often in Christian ministry we long for more resources – and that is not necessarily wrong. But sometimes God basically says to us, ‘look at what you’ve got’. With a God-given creative spirit that can be the key to everything.

We remember the LORD’s words to Moses as he calls him to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt, *What is that in your hand?* Exodus 4.2.

As the Philistines come running, shouting at Samson to kill him he grabs what is to hand. And he thoroughly defeats them, striking down a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey, Judges 15.7.

As David is brave enough to face Goliath, Saul wants to put him in a suit of armour and load him with the usual weapons of a warrior. David tries it and knows it won't work, 1 Samuel 17.39. But what will work is what he has been used to using for years – his sling which can fire great big pebbles, the size of a man's fist at tremendous speed at the head of the slow giant. Sometimes, under God, what we have is enough – used in a creative way.

And when we begin to use the situation creatively, we are no longer discouraged, but joyous, resilient.

4: How you see yourself

The apostle Paul uses a picture from the boxing ring to describe his ministry. *I do not fight like a man beating the air*, 1 Corinthians 9.26. He is in a fight and one of his opponents is his own sinful flesh. But he is determined to win.

The Cinderella Man

The way we see ourselves makes a lot of difference to our mental attitude. This is very apparent in the true story of US boxer James J Braddock, dramatized in the 2005 film *The Cinderella Man*, starring Russell Crowe as Braddock and Renee Zellwéger as his wife.

His dates are 1905 – 1974 and he was born in what was known as Hell’s Kitchen in Manhattan. He had been a good boxer but had broken his hand. Then the Great Depression hit America. He could hardly make a living and look after his family getting sporadic work on the New York docks. Living in slum conditions, there is a point in the film at which it becomes clear that unless he can earn more money his children will have to go into care. He sees himself as never before as a father on whom his family depends.

This spurs him back into the ring. But this time, not just as a boxer, but as a father. He is now fighting for his family. This new view of himself changes everything. He strives to overcome his hand injuries and goes all out. In March 1935 Braddock was given a world heavyweight title fight against the huge German champion Max Baer at Madison Square Garden. The history books tell us that Braddock won the fight. The amount of money he earned set up his family for life and he was able to buy them a house. The way we see ourselves matters.

Paul’s invitation

In 2 Timothy 2.3-7 the apostle Paul gives an invitation to Timothy and to us, to see ourselves in new ways which have a lot to do with resilience.

Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No-one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer. Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.

What Timothy was, of course, was a preacher / pastor. But, on its own, that is not how Paul encourages him to think about himself. He encourages him to think of himself as a soldier, an athlete and a farmer. And these pictures become quite central in Paul's view of ministry, Acts 20.24; 1 Corinthians 3.6.

- *The soldier*

The great concern of a soldier is to do their duty laid down for them by their commanding officer. Duty is a word that is rather out of fashion. Soldiers are in a fight – it is so important to remember that. We have an enemy, the devil. That trouble that has occurred is not because you are no good as a preacher / pastor. It is because you have an enemy. And so you see things differently. Don't have a down on yourself. And realise soldiers need time away from the front line – they need rest if they are going to be effective in the battle.

- *The athlete*

The word we associate with athletes is discipline. They train hard in all weather. And they must keep to the rules. If you take a short cut or hop on a bus in a marathon race – you are disqualified. If you take a short cut, your ministry is of no use. Some men decide they want a large congregation – and the way to get that is to change the gospel. They preach things like health and wealth. Or they latch on to the message, for example, of pop psychology dressed up in Christian words. (Perhaps things like healing your memories – which has no foundation as far as I can see in Scripture). But people love all this and the attention it gives them – while the gospel of forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is forgotten. And the path of Christ is through self-denial and sacrifice with a clear conscience, Mark 8.34. The good pastor / preacher does his best to follow this rule too.

- *The farmer*

The word of wisdom for the farmer is diligence. There is a multiplicity of things for a farmer to do – not just sowing, but watering and keeping the pests off and much more. And the trick is to keep going and not give up. This is diligence. As a pastor you might ask, 'Why is there no harvest yet?' Well, the answer is, harvests don't grow overnight. You are not a failure. It's not your fault there is no fruit yet. But keep at it. It will come, some thirty fold, some sixty fold, some a hundred fold. Be diligent.

Now the reason I have drawn your attention to these verses is because of the way Paul ends. What does he say? *Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this, v7.* So, I want to suggest as before the Lord we

meditate on these pictures of ministry – the Lord will help us to see ourselves and our ministries in a new light. It will give you balance in the way you view yourself and your ministry.

Conclusion

This is far from all that could be said about resilience.

But these four are worth embracing:

- facing down the apparent reality (because the true reality is God);
- seeing God's purpose (because though you are in one small place you are part of God's big picture);
- being intentionally creative (how can we take these bad circumstances by the scruff of the neck and make them work for Christ's kingdom?); and
- thinking Biblically about how you should see yourself and your expectations in ministry.