

FAITH ROOTS

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The Secret of Resilience

Some kids from abusive homes will struggle all their lives just to function normally. Other kids from the same kinds of homes will enjoy great success.

What makes the difference?

Science is beginning to uncover the secret of resilience. For years we've been hearing about how our genes and our environment determine our destiny. Psychologists have focused on all the ways in which human beings are damaged. Social scientists have determined risk factors—the things that put children and families at risk. We've heard a lot on the news about violent neighborhoods, substandard education, poverty, neglectful or abusive parents. These are the factors that drive kids to crime or to drugs or to a life of broken relationships.

But then came a landmark study on the island of Kauai of 700 infants born in 1955. Many of these were “at risk” kids. They were headed for trouble. But researchers followed their development for four decades. And they discovered that a lot of kids don't fit the script. Many individuals from the worst environments just

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aren't failing in life as they're "supposed" to. They grow up to be healthy, productive adults. Lots of people overcome intense stress and adversity.

Today, more and more researchers are zeroing in on the "protective factors" that enable individuals to bounce back. There's a new wind blowing through the field of psychology. Instead of trying to explain human behavior in terms of uncontrollable factors, psychologists are uncovering ways in which people achieve a better life.

Well, what have they come up with? All of us would like to be more resilient. We'd like to thrive in adversity. So what's the secret? What is it that makes some "at risk" individuals overcome the odds?

Dr. Albert Bandura, a Stanford University professor and one of the pioneers in this new field, has identified the key ingredient in resilience. He calls it "self-efficacy"—the belief that action will produce results.

Now that may not sound very startling. Doesn't everyone believe that actions will produce results? The answer is, No. Victims don't. People who are overwhelmed by adversity don't. People who can't get beyond a bad environment don't. Some individuals come to believe that what they do won't really make a difference. They feel helpless. They just go with the flow. They don't realize that these very assumptions keep them trapped in bad circumstances. That's what it really boils down to.

Self-efficacy is the conviction that I can change things. It's the assumption that I am responsible for my life. As Dr. Bandura puts it: "People have the

power to influence what they do and to make things happen.”

In recent years, we’ve learned about the harmful effects of stress on the immune system. Stress breaks the body down, we’ve been told. But did you know there is also a body of research that shows that stress, *coupled with a belief that a problem can be overcome*, actually *strengthens* the immune system. Same stress, different attitudes—totally different physical impact.

Two major studies looked at African-American and Hispanic adolescents in Chicago and analyzed the key difference between those who showed resilience and those who didn’t. What made the difference? “A stronger cognitive motivational pattern.” In plain English, “a more positive attitude.” The resilient teens believed they could change their environment.

Did you know that this same essential quality, this same belief, is highlighted in the New Testament? Yes, long before these psychological studies Christ and His apostles understood what resilience is really about. And they shed a very special light on the subject. Paul was a man who knew plenty about adversity. Listen to his great affirmation: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Now that’s self-efficacy! That’s confidence! Paul didn’t just believe that his actions would produce positive results. He believed that he could do “all things.” But that confidence was firmly grounded in his faith in Christ. Christ enabled him to do all things. Christ strengthened him to meet such chal-

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lenges as imprisonment and shipwreck—with cheerful resilience.

In the New Testament, it's faith that enables us to keep believing that our actions will produce positive results—even in the worst of circumstances. Faith is the key ingredient in resilience. Listen to Jesus' great affirmation about faith: "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20, 21, NIV).

Faith enables us to move mountains. That's the good news Christ brings us. With faith, nothing is impossible. Faith is a shield that protects us from the flaming arrows of the enemy. Faith enables us to overcome the world. Faith keeps us safe. Yes, faith in God is the ultimate protective factor. It's the surest path to resilience.

Today, research is beginning to demonstrate precisely that fact. Here's one study published by Cambridge University Press. A sociologist studied children from all kinds of backgrounds and communities. And then he zeroed in on the most resilient children among them. What did they have in common? According to the report, the common factor was: "Religious beliefs that provided stability and meaning to their lives, especially in times of hardship."

Dr. Albert Bandura looked at families who best helped their children overcome obstacles and challenges in their environments. One of the things that stood out was this: Successful families developed links with local churches and other social organizations that

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gave their kids positive role models. These were parents, Bandura reports, who didn't let their dismal environment defeat them. They created social ties that helped protect their kids against the dangers in their world.

The same holds true of schools. Researchers discovered that certain schools helped "at risk" kids much more than others. Why? Teachers in those schools tended to believe that their students had the capacity for resilience. They believed that individuals can change—and even transform—their lives. They had high expectations.

Interesting, isn't it? People who believed they would find resilience actually developed it. People who believed their students could accomplish more, enabled them to do just that. Yes, even kids from impoverished homes. Yes, even kids from violent neighborhoods. Yes, even kids with drug-addicted parents.

These kids found someone who believed in them. And they latched on to that. They formed nurturing relationships with better role models. They responded to those high expectations.

Do you realize that this is exactly what can happen in a community of faith? This is why Christ founded His church. It can be a gold mine of resilience.

Listen to how the writer of Hebrews describes relationships in Christ's body, the church: "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith. . . . And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together . . . but let us encourage one another." (Hebrews 10:22, 24, 25, NIV).

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Drawing near to God helps us draw near to one another. The assurance of faith helps us assure others. Knowing that we can do all things in Christ helps us “spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” God’s encouragement enables us to encourage others. This is what a community of faith can do. It produces resilience.

Dr. Wendy Haight conducted a four-year study of African-American children in Salt Lake City, Utah. These were children who regularly experienced isolation and discrimination. But at the First Baptist Church they attended, these kids experienced something very different. Dr. Haight carefully documented the ways in which Sunday School teachers developed faith in these children.

And what were the results? They developed a sense of belonging. They developed a healthy self-esteem. They identified with a gospel message of love and hope and equality. And they were able to rise above hatred. They were able to rise above the low expectations of many teachers in their city. Dr. Haight demonstrated that the experience of developing faith in church made these kids significantly more resilient.

Researchers have found that positive group experiences help people become more resilient in another way as well. Besides believing in people, besides having high expectations, positive groups also provide opportunities for individuals to participate, to get involved. That’s true in school. If kids can find responsible roles to fulfill in their schools, they tend to develop resilient traits.

And meaningful participation is exactly what a community of faith offers. There's a beautiful picture in the New Testament of what the church really is. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul compares the church to a body made up of many different members. Each member of the body has a vital role to play. Where would the body be without eyes to see? Where would the body be without feet to walk? Where would the body be without ears to hear?

Similarly, each member of Christ's body, each member of a church, has a spiritual gift, some ability to contribute. And every gift is vital to the function of the whole body. Some are teachers. Some are scholars. Some are good listeners. Some have the gift of hospitality. But everyone can participate meaningfully—according to their gifts. That's what a community of faith offers.

And, as we know now, that's one of the ways to develop resilience. So, if you want to bounce back, get involved in a local congregation. If you want to be an overcomer, find a way to participate.

That's part of what Dr. Haight demonstrated in her study of children in Salt Lake City. Those kids didn't just come to church and sit idly in the pew; they got very involved in the stories told, very involved in the discussions of what faith means.

A community of faith does make a profound difference. The Bible clearly shows us that faith is the best way to self-efficacy. Faith is the foundation of resilience. Faith in God. Faith in what Christ can do for you. Faith invested in other people. Faith expressed in a community.

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James had some very interesting comments on faith:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:14-17).

Many scholars see these words as part of a theological debate. For some, they’re proof texts used to define saving faith precisely. For others they’re a problem that must be reconciled with justification by faith.

But I believe these words have great relevance—just as they are—when it comes to practical living, when it comes to resilience. James’s great burden is to show that genuine faith, living faith, is not something passive. It doesn’t replace action. It inspires action. It expresses itself through action.

And that, again, is the crucial element in resilience—believing that actions produce results. The person who claims to have faith but doesn’t do anything for a destitute friend is really saying, “I can’t help; my contribution won’t make a difference.”

Real faith, James insists, is believing that you must act because your actions make a difference. They make a difference because God is at work in us. They make a difference because God makes all things possible through faith.

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James pointed back to the father of faith, Abraham, as an example of this healthy kind of belief. This was the Abraham who acted in response to God's command. The patriarch who followed God out of Chaldea into a great adventure. The man who believed God and had it counted as righteousness. The man who became the father of a great nation.

“Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?” (James 2:22).

The life of faith and the active life aren't on opposite ends of the spectrum. They function best together. Our faith gives our actions great potential. And it's these actions, in turn, which intensify our faith. Faith grows deeper as it is expressed. That, my friends, is the ultimate secret of resilience.

God has a great plan for you to develop resilience. He can make you an overcomer. He can help you to prosper in times of adversity. He can strengthen you on the inside. He can enable you to do all things.

Your environment may be forbidding. You may have obstacles all around you. You may come from a dysfunctional family. You may have handicaps or addictions.

But God is bigger than all that.

Are you feeling helpless? God is bigger than your habit.

Are people putting you down? God believes in you much more.

Have you been labeled a loser? God has high expectations.

Do you feel abandoned? God gave up everything to claim you as His own.

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You just can't have a better Person on your side. So isn't it time to respond with a little faith? Isn't it time to respond with whatever faith you can muster?

Tell God, "Here I am. I'm willing to act. I'm willing to take responsibility. I'm willing to make better choices. I'm willing because You make good things happen. You magnify the results."

Tell God, "Here I am." He will set your feet surely on the road to resilience.