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PREFACE

How ironic. Here I am writing a book on resilience, and I myself have been struggling to be resilient. During the writing of this book, I've experienced several life-shaking events. Our beloved five-year-old golden retriever, Max, died suddenly. As I was hitting my stride on the last lap of writing, I had to have back surgery. The surgery itself went well, and I was feeling strong and ready to add more movement to my daily life when an infection began to brew, which required four weeks of antibiotics. I eventually had two more minor surgical procedures to help the infection heal. Four weeks on a wound VAC followed.

During this time, I continued to teach my full schedule of university classes. In college there are no substitute teachers! The semester kept rolling on, and I showed up as best as I could, but I struggled to keep up with seven classes. It felt like the semester would never end. If this were not enough, my daughter, Annie, had elbow surgery. Then my wife, Shelly, had surgery to remove a benign brain tumor. During this stormy season, my emotional life often alternated between anger and sadness, with just enough joy sprinkled in to keep me going. And we all struggled through the uncharted waters of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With God's help, I've gotten up each time I've fallen. Practicing habits of prayer, positive self-talk, cultivating gratitude, playing golf, getting adequate sleep, and exercising regularly have helped me stay faithful spiritually, recover physically, and heal

emotionally. Experiencing the beauty of creation during daily walks along the river as fall leaves turned golden, short winter days passed into the liveliness of spring, and spring leapt into the long, warm, glorious days of summer have also helped to heal my weary soul.

As we begin our journey through this book, I want you to know that I'm a work in progress. Resilience is not something we become experts at once and for all. Just as with growing in love, resilience is a character trait that we strive and work toward every day of our lives. Sometimes we're prepared for the storms of life; other times we're not. With God's help and that of friends and loved ones, we do the best we can.

My own recent season of struggle has reminded me that the life of Christlike holiness is not one of absolute flawlessness, where we never make mistakes and always get things right. It's about getting up one more time than we fall down. It's persevering "despite a ton of bad luck" (Psalm 116:10, MSG). It's knowing that, because of God's constant love, we always have the landing pad of grace to catch us when we fall. It's keeping our eyes on Jesus rather than on the storms that may be forming on the horizon.

The troubles we encounter often catch us off guard, even though Jesus himself told us we will have trouble. Trouble today. Trouble tomorrow. Count on it. So don't be surprised when trouble comes knocking, he says. Because he has overcome the world, we can too (see John 16:33).

What follows is a cautionary story about resilience.

A Cautionary Tale

In the fall of 1992, Michael Plant, one of the United States' most highly skilled sailors, set out on a solo crossing of the North Atlantic Ocean, from New York to France. Just eleven days after he left New York Harbor, radio contact was lost. A massive search ensued, covering more than two hundred thousand square miles.

Plant was a seasoned sailor, having sailed around the world solo three times. He had sailed through hurricanes and had even survived his yacht capsizing in forty-five-foot swells in the Indian Ocean. He had “repaired a broken mast, fixed a busted generator, [and] repaired his hull after a collision with another vessel off Cape Town.”¹ He also had numerous close calls with icebergs. Because of these and other experiences, he knew well the perils of inadequate preparation and lack of constant vigilance on the open sea.

Plant’s boat, *Coyote*, was state-of-the-art. *Coyote* was a new boat and largely untested. Plant had taken it out for only a few brief trips before leaving for France. The one concern he had before his trip was that he had not grown familiar enough with the boat.

For pinpoint emergency location, Plant had purchased a Raytheon 406 Emergency Position-indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB). This beacon is designed to send a signal to a satellite every fifty seconds. This signal is then sent to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which in turn relays the message to the Coast Guard. In *Coyote*’s case, the Coast Guard never received a notification from NOAA. Later investigation revealed that Plant’s EPIRB sent out weak transmission bursts two weeks after leaving New York Harbor. Instead of the four bursts necessary to fix a boat’s location, there had been only three. His friends later discovered that, in Plant’s haste to leave, he had failed to register his EPIRB with the NOAA—a mistake that may have cost him his life.

Coyote was eventually found, but only after Plant had been lost at sea for thirty-two days. The sixty-foot racing yacht was found capsized, drifting upside down in eight-foot swells. *Coyote*’s eighty-five-foot mast was submerged in the freezing waters,

1. E. M. Swift, “Mystery at Sea,” *Sports Illustrated Vault*, November 30, 1992, <https://vault.si.com/vault/1992/11/30/mystery-at-sea-after-a-massive-sea-and-air-search-the-60-foot-racing-sloop-coyote-was-found-capsized-in-the-north-atlantic-but-the-fate-of-her-skipper-round-the-world-sailor-michael-plant-was-still-unknown>. I have drawn primarily from this article in summarizing Plant’s fate.

still fully rigged with sails. The boat's hull was intact, its twin rudders operational. Even its carbon-filter keel was still in place. Missing, however, was *Coyote's* 8,400-pound lead keel bulb. Without an intact keel bulb, there was insufficient counteracting weight to keep the boat upright in a strong wind or severe storm. Without the weight of a keel bulb, no yacht can right itself once it overturns. In order for a sailboat to remain stable and upright in the midst of deep swells and howling winds, there must be more "more weight below the waterline than there is above it. Any violation of this principle of weight distribution means disaster."²

No one ever discovered why the 8,400-pound bulb broke away from the keel. Gordon MacDonald asks, "Did *Coyote* hit an underwater object? Some ocean debris? Was there a defect in the boatbuilding process?"³

Searchers, upon reaching the overturned boat, found the emergency life raft still inside the ship, halfway inflated, but no sign of Plant. His loss remains a mystery to this day, decades later.

What are some of the lessons that this tragic story raises about resilience?

- Storms come unexpectedly to us all. We cannot escape storms. We can only learn how to weather them.
- Character, like a keel bulb, is often unseen but is completely necessary for enduring the storms of life.
- "‘Sub-waterline issues’ seem unimportant when seas are calm and winds are favorable. So it's only when the storms hit and something catastrophic happens that we are likely to ask a different set of questions."⁴

2. Gordon MacDonald, *The Life God Blesses: Weathering the Storms of Life That Threaten the Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 4. MacDonald's book is the first place I learned of Plant's story.

3. MacDonald, *The Life God Blesses*, 4.

4. MacDonald, *The Life God Blesses*, 11.

- What regular practices help you care for what’s below waterline in your life?
- How do you intentionally seek to strengthen your character so you can remain resilient when storms hit?
- Any sea captain will tell you that if you steer a ship just a few degrees this way or that, you will completely alter its trajectory. Over the course of a long journey, it may end up hundreds of miles from where it would have without that slight adjustment.
 - What practices help keep you on course spiritually, physically, emotionally, and relationally?

Michael Plant’s story highlights the importance of incorporating daily practices into our lives that build resilience and can act as a counterbalance when the storms of life threaten to capsize us. This concept is not meant to add to our already overwhelmed lives. It’s meant to help us see that we can take small steps and begin adding micro habits to the lives we already live. Like anything else that nurtures our relationship with God and others, it will take effort and patience. If we forget or get distracted, we can begin again. The point is to alter the compass of our lives just fractions of a degree. Even a small change to our compass can make a world of difference in our final destination.

INTRODUCTION

Resilience

RESILIENCE TIP

Resilient people learn to cultivate Christlike character that will help them weather the storms of life.

We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken.

—2 Corinthians 4:8–9 (MSG)

"Sometimes," said the horse.

"Sometimes what?" asked the boy.

"Sometimes just getting up and carrying on is brave and magnificent."

—Charlie Mackesy, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*

These are times in which a genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or in the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed. The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. Great necessities call out great virtues.

—Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 1780

Life is hard. Sometimes we feel like quitting. How do we respond when life becomes difficult? When marriage seems impossible? When our kids have lost their way? When there are conflicts at church? When we experience unrelenting pain or

illness? When our finances are overwhelming? When our jobs are unbearable? What do we do when we feel like we're living life on a treadmill—going faster and faster without going anywhere? How do we persevere? How do we finish well?

This is a book about resilience—about how, with God's help, we can become the kind of people who are able to withstand the setbacks and storms of life. It's been said that authors write the books we ourselves need. That is true for me, both in this book and in my previous book, *Healthy. Happy. Holy: 7 Practices toward a Holistic Life*.¹ Before starting to write this present book, I had grown weary and didn't know how much I needed a book on this topic until I started writing it. I hope you find ideas, stories, encouragement, and courage in these pages to keep loving, to keep hoping, to remain faithful even in difficult times. May we be able to say along with the psalmist, "I stayed faithful, though overwhelmed, and despite a ton of bad luck, despite giving up on the human race, saying, "They're all liars and cheats" (Psalm 116:10–11, MSG).

Most of the lessons I've learned in my life about how to be more resilient have come uninvited. Whatever resilience there is in my life that has taken root has largely been in response to unexpected setbacks. I've tried my best to "make hay while the sun shines," but it's usually when I'm in the eye of the storm that I most carefully pay attention to God. Like many, perhaps, I don't change so much when I see the light but when I feel the heat. I've also learned that the most difficult seasons of life are the ones in which I discover just how deep the love of God and my own character go.

The final race of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics was the marathon. As the last runners were crossing the finishing line,

1. I want to encourage you, if you ever write a book, not to have the three words "healthy," "happy," and "holy" in it! People like to ask me, "How are you doing at being healthy, happy, *and* holy?" I think about it like a good baseball player does. If I can get a hit one out of every three at bats, I'm doing very well.

word came in that one more runner was still out there, struggling to finish. Only a few spectators remained as darkness settled on the stadium. The last runner, John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania, had been injured during the race but had continued to run despite incredible pain. With his injured right knee bandaged, he hobbled the last lap around the stadium and stumbled across the finish line well over an hour behind the winner. As he crossed, those who remained in the stadium went berserk, applauding him as if he had won.

He was later asked, “Why didn’t you quit?”

His answer was simple: “My country did not send me five thousand miles to start the race. They sent me five thousand miles to finish the race.”²

Few of us will ever be Olympians. Nevertheless, God has given each of us a race to run (1 Corinthians 9:24–25). Like Akhwari, we will encounter unforeseen obstacles along the way. We will be tempted to quit. Persevering in the face of overwhelming circumstances is what I call resilience. I find the following definitions of resilience helpful as well.

Dictionary.com: *the power or ability of a material to return to its original form, position, etc., after being bent, compressed, or stretched; elasticity; the ability of a person to adjust to or recover readily from illness, adversity, major life changes, etc.; buoyancy.*³

The American Psychological Association: *Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.*⁴

Various synonyms for resilience also come to mind: perseverance, patience, endurance, buoyancy, flexibility, adaptability, elasticity, tenacity, character, courage, steadfastness of spirit, grit,

2. A video of Akhwari finishing his Olympic race can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6oW9uYtJnA>.

3. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/resilience>.

4. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, “Resilience,” <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>.

moxie. Those who are resilient also exhibit many so-called childish characteristics: curiosity, wonder, exuberance, teachability, humility, and an always-ready-for-adventure attitude. We will need childlike enthusiasm and openness to all that God desires to teach us on the road to living lives of Christlike character.

Resilient souls finish well. Finishing well doesn't mean we never stumble or fall or that we always get everything exactly right. No matter how fierce the pain or deep the humiliation, resilient ones get back up one more time than they fall down. As the apostle Paul put it, "We often suffer, but we are never crushed. Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up. In times of trouble, God is with us, and when we are knocked down, we get up again" (2 Corinthians 4:8–9, CEV). It's not *where* we finish. It's *that* we finish. "We get up again," Paul says. Like Akhwari, we may stumble, fall, and fail—yet we strain to find the strength to struggle on.

Resilience isn't something we do on our own. We need one another in order to run well the race we've been given. Perhaps you've seen the "pass it on" commercials from The Foundation for a Better Life. One of the most poignant pictures is of young athletes stopping in the middle of the race to help a fallen friend so they can all finish together.⁵ What better picture of the Christian life is there than this? As the body of Christ, with each part fulfilling its God-given purpose, we strengthen one another by staying connected, like tendons that connect muscle to bone. Our goal is not to finish first but to finish together. And that takes resilience.

Resilient people weather adversity. We finish what we start. We encourage and train ourselves in stubborn hope. We flex muscles of faith. We trust in God and lean on our companions in Christ. When we fall down, we allow others to dust us off, bandage our wounds, and help us get back to our feet. With grace and mercy, we also help others who have fallen to get back up and continue their race.

5. You can find this wonderful video at <https://www.passiton.com/inspirational-stories-tv-spots/142-special-athlete>.

Resilience isn't a competition. It's not about winning or losing, succeeding or failing. It's about helping someone who's lost their way find hope again. It's persisting in small acts of love even when there are no visible results. It's continuing to lean into faith, hope, and love in spite of setbacks, temptations, trials, pain, failure, or despair.

Resilience is deeply vulnerable. When we're with those who truly love us, we don't need to pretend. In an environment of love and trust, we can truly be our God-created-in-Christ selves. We can dare to tell others what's really going on in our lives. And we can dare to listen to others, offering them a safe place where they too can be their whole selves and hear the voice of love assuring them, "You are my beloved child. Nothing can ever snatch you from my hand" (See John 10:28; Romans 8:35, 37–39).

Resilience is also both gift and craft. Resilience is a fruit of the Spirit's work in us, where God plants seeds of perseverance in the soil of our lives so we can remain standing when the winds of adversity threaten to topple us. But resilience is also a skill we can hone. There are certain practices—what we Wesleyan Christians refer to as "means of grace"—that draw upon the resources of God to strengthen our grit muscles so we can "run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1).⁶

John Wesley believed that growth in Christlikeness was neither automatic nor accidental. None of us wander or stumble into spiritual maturity. We cultivate Christlike character by actively practicing the means of grace. N. T. Wright says something similar: "The qualities of character Jesus and his followers insist on as the vital signs of healthy Christian life don't come about automatically. You have to develop them. You have to work at them."⁷ Resilience is a cord of three strands: God's Spirit working

6. For those who are not familiar with the term "Wesleyan," it refers to Protestant church traditions that continue to be formed by the life and ministry of eighteenth-century Anglican priest John Wesley, who is considered the founder of the Methodist movement.

7. N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 28.

in us (grace), our faithful response to everyday problems (circumstances), and our intentional efforts to grow in Christlike holiness (formative practices). None of us is born pre-loaded with resilience. Resilience grows gradually as we respond to the temptations, trials, setbacks, and failures of a lifetime.

The apostle Paul often refers to the Christian life as a race. In the book of Acts, Paul says, “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (20:24). At the end of Paul’s life he tells his protégé in the faith, Timothy: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). The race Paul is referring to is not a sprint but a marathon—perhaps even something more like an ultra-marathon.

When I lived in Colorado, I frequently heard about those who ran hundred-mile ultra-marathons in the mountains. I was grateful just to be able to hike up a fourteen-thousand-foot mountain, so running up and down and back up was definitely on this side of impossible for me. As I did some research on ultra-marathons, I was shocked to find out they are run all over the world, often in some of the most arid and elevated places on the planet. These races wend their way through mountains and valleys, twists and turns, night and day, hot and cold, rocks and snakes, with obstacles around every corner. An ultra-marathon is a good image of the kind of life we have set before us.

Resilience is a journey. Some days everything will go right. Other days it will seem the deck is stacked against us. Life is unpredictable and sometimes cruel. What is constant is God’s faithfulness. When the winds of adversity howl and the waves rage, it’s tempting to take our eyes off God and put them onto our circumstances. Just like the disciples in the boat with a sleeping Jesus, we cry out, “Lord, are we going to drown?”

The disciples were so overwhelmed by the storm that they couldn’t even think to ask Jesus to save them. The only thing that

occurred to them was to cry out the first thing that came to their minds: “We’re going to drown!” (see Mark 4:35–41). This story comforts me because I don’t always have the best first response to the storms of life either—or the best second or third response, for that matter. Like the disciples, we may not always know the right words to pray. The only thing we can do in times like these is to cry out, whimper, wail, and groan (see Romans 8:22–27).

My Journey with Depression

When I was in my mid-thirties, I found myself in the clutches of a clinical depression from which I feared I would never escape. I remember all too well how ashamed I was at “allowing” myself to become depressed. Depression felt like weakness and failure to me. I thought at the time that I was the only pastor ever to have experienced depression. I had the unrealistic idea that pastors were always strong, happy, and free of doubt—which of course meant I viewed myself as a failure.

I will talk more fully about my depression in a later chapter, but for now I want to say that, in my journey to crawl out of the pit of despair, one of the most helpful things that happened to me during this time was having to write my doctoral dissertation. During a time when I largely lacked the energy to get out of bed and felt like giving up most days, having a dissertation to write gave me purpose and direction. I realize not everyone would have this response to having such a daunting task hanging over their head while battling depression, but for me at the time it was life-giving. It gave me a track to run on. I may not have been able to figure out what to cook my wife and young children for dinner, but the dissertation work was at least one thing that appeared clear to me.⁸

8. In order to keep this book to a readable length, I’m compressing a long period of time with many bouts of hopelessness and despair into a more manageable narrative. For the dissertation I wrote, see Joe Gorman, *The Management and Prevention of*

After starting to take antidepressant medication and undergo counseling, I slowly began to emerge from the deepest dregs of depression. It didn't take long for me to figure out that the most obvious topic in the world for my dissertation was to write about helping pastors—including myself!—manage burnout and depression. So that's what I did. Thankfully, I was able to engage in an academic exercise and work toward healing at the same time. Writing was a lifeline for me. We truly do write the books we ourselves need. What I also discovered during that process is just how many pastors and laypeople suffer from depression. Depression is no respecter of persons. Even faithful, lifelong Christ followers can lose heart and experience deep depression.

As I went about my research, it became crucial for me to know I was not the only one ever to have experienced depression. I needed some heroes of faith, like those in Hebrews 11, to encourage me: *Joe, keep running, don't give up. Your depression will not last forever. We've been there. We felt hopeless at times too. But God is faithful. God will make a way where there seems to be no way. We recovered, and so can you.*

As I studied the psychology and biology of depression, I also began to do some rummaging around in church history. Somewhere along the way I heard rumors that some well-known Christian leaders had also experienced depression. It took some digging because we in the church talk about depression about as much as we talk about our sex lives—which isn't much. It wasn't long before I began to see just how prevalent burnout and depression have been among Christian leaders throughout the centuries, including Martin Luther, J. B. Phillips, William Cowper, Henri Nouwen, Mother Teresa, Charles Spurgeon, Martin Luther King, Jr., and even John Wesley,⁹ to name a few.

Burnout and Depression in Pastors, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/4042f4c982d2a4d81135db280940ad35/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

9. If you are interested in learning more about some of the depressive episodes Wesley went through, see Joe Gorman, "John Wesley in an Age of Melancholy," *Wesleyan Theological*

That these heroes and heroines of faith also experienced depression helped normalize my own experience. It also normalized my humanity. It was a lifeline to discover there was nothing unusual or defective about me. I was simply human. I don't think it's accurate to say that we are "only" human, but it is true that we are *indeed* human. As fragile and frail beings, our lives are a mixture of strength and weakness. We laugh and cry. Rejoice and mourn. Hope and despair. Worship and weep.

The more I read about the history of depression among Christian leaders, the more encouraged I felt. I was not alone. I was a member of a long community of faith that sought to be faithful Christ followers in the midst of sometimes overwhelming seasons of life. Like me, they felt like giving up from time to time. I was not the first or the last to feel this way. As I learned that others had experienced depression yet finished their races well, I began to experience glimmers of hope that I might finish mine as well. The dark, thick fog slowly began to recede. This is one of the reasons I love reading memoirs, biographies, and journals of those whose character was forged in the crucible of incredible obstacles and immense pain. Several who have shaped my own journey toward resilience include Corrie ten Boom, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Viktor Frankl, Etty Hillesum, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Anthony Ray Hinton, Kate Bowler.

Corrie ten Boom was the only one of her family to survive the Holocaust. The rest of her family was murdered in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. In spite of living through unimaginable horrors, Corrie later wrote several books and spoke of God's presence with her and her sister, Betsie, throughout their time in Ravensbrück. Before Betsie's death in Ravensbrück, she told Corrie, "[We] must tell people what we have learned here. We

Journal, 34:2, 1999. If I were writing this article today, the biggest change I would make is to take out the spiritualizing approach I took toward depression. I was still in the early years of my own recovery and had a long journey ahead of me when I wrote this article.

must tell them that there is no pit so deep that [God] is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here.”¹⁰

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and one of the most significant Christian theologians of the twentieth century, was teaching at Union Theological Seminary in the United States during Hitler’s rise to power. He could have remained safe and comfortable in his prestigious post, but his understanding of the cost of Christian discipleship compelled him to return to his homeland to resist the spreading menace of Nazism. After returning to Germany, he started a seminary in Finkenvalde to train ministers in the Confessing Church. His goal was to train leaders who would stay faithful to Christ in the midst of the Nazi takeover of churches throughout Germany. Bonhoeffer was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler that narrowly missed. As a result, he was imprisoned for two years. Even in prison he continued to write to family and friends. One of his most important books, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, came from this time. Bonhoeffer was executed at the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945, less than a month before the Allies liberated Europe. His witness to the cost of following Christ continues to resonate today.

Anthony Ray Hinton was wrongly imprisoned for twenty-eight years for a murder he did not commit. Living in the shadow of death row for most of his years in prison, Hinton often felt hopeless. Lester, his best friend since childhood, drove eight hours one way every Friday night after getting off work to see him for an hour once a week for twenty-eight straight years. Friends like this sustain us in the midst of the deepest hopelessness of our lives. When Hinton had given up hope that he would ever be exonerated, lawyer Bryan Stevenson from the Equal Justice Initiative took on his case. Stevenson was and is a fierce advocate for the underrepresented and wrongly imprisoned. He wrote about his work with the Equal Justice Initiative in his poignant and

10. Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1971), 217.

eye-opening book *Just Mercy*. After working more than fifteen years to free Hinton, Stevenson won the right to represent the case before the United States Supreme Court, and in February 2014, the Supreme Court unanimously overturned Hinton's conviction. The state of Alabama, where Hinton had been imprisoned all those years, eventually followed suit, dropping all charges. Hinton was released from prison April 3, 2015. Hinton's faithfulness and Christian witness stand as a living reminder that we too can maintain hope even in the midst of the most hopeless of circumstances.¹¹

Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Lewis, both pastors and political activists, gave their lives to advocate for justice in the face of racism, oppression, and often violent opposition.¹²

Kate Bowler is learning to live faithfully with stage-four colon cancer as a college professor, writer, podcaster, wife, and mother.¹³

Nicholas Wolterstorff learned how to go on living after the loss of his twenty-five-year-old son in a mountaineering accident.¹⁴

Viktor Frankl's ability to imagine life after Auschwitz enabled him to find a reason to endure the daily horrors of concentration camp life and survive conditions that overwhelmed so many others. One of Frankl's most important insights for our purposes are the observations he made about how resilient and not so resilient people fared in Auschwitz: "Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis, it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision and not the result of camp influences

11. For Hinton's memoir, see Anthony Ray Hinton, *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life, Freedom, and Justice* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2018).

12. For a moving biography of Lewis, see Jon Meacham, *His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope* (New York: Random House, 2020).

13. See Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)* (New York: Random House, 2018). For Kate's wonderful podcast, see katebowler.com/everything-happens.

14. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

alone. Fundamentally then, any man can, under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually.”¹⁵

Etty Hillesum, facing death while imprisoned in the Westerbork Nazi transit camp in northern Holland, was somehow able to keep her focus on helping others. She wrote in her journal before being transferred to Auschwitz, where she was eventually murdered: “We should be willing to act as a balm for all wounds.”¹⁶

I consider each of these women and men, living and dead, my mentors. Their lives have the ring of authenticity and exert a unique moral authority. Having deeply suffered, they remained faithful even in the midst of the most hellish circumstances imaginable. They have helped me put the pain and struggle of my own life into perspective. I don’t mean that their heroism minimizes my own trials, but their stories help me “right-size” my struggles. Their faithfulness helps me tell myself a more hopeful story. In order to keep running our races, it sometimes helps to know that others have gone before us and experienced the worst that life has to offer yet found the strength to take another step.

These teachers are like those in Hebrews 11, the chapter we often call the “faith hall of fame.” Like Abel, they still speak, even after they are dead (see v. 4). They lean over the railing of heaven, encouraging us to take one more step, get up one more time, keep searching for traces of grace and glimmers of hope, keep working and praying so that God’s vision spoken through the prophet Amos will be realized: “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24).

Digging a Deeper Well

Each of these faithful ones reminds me that we must dig our personal wells deep enough for there to be water to draw from

15. Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 66.

16. Etty Hillesum, *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Metropolis Books, 1996), 230–31.

during the driest times of life. More than twenty years ago, I started doing compassionate ministry projects in Africa when I began teaching for a month each summer at Africa Nazarene University in Nairobi, Kenya. I met and connected deeply with several of the students I taught, who went back to their home countries following graduation to become pastors and district superintendents. Several invited me to visit them and share ministry together. From these significant friendships, we eventually started a nonprofit organization, Compassion for Africa, that partners with Nazarene Compassionate Ministries in Ghana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda.¹⁷

Over the years we've learned a few things about digging wells. One of the most important things is to dig during the dry season, when the water table is at its lowest. If the well is deep enough to provide plenty of water during the driest times, then there will be enough water throughout the year. Recall Jesus's words about the wise man who "dug down deep" when he built his house on a solid foundation (Luke 6:48). We learned this lesson by trial and error, of course. Early on we dug a few wells when the rain was still falling, only to discover later, during the dry season, that the wells had dried up, disappointing and inconveniencing hundreds who had grown to count on the wells as reliable and safe sources of water. These wells were later re-dug during the dry season. These painful experiences taught me that resilience is an intentional process of digging a deeper well that can sustain us and those we love even during the driest times of our lives.

Resilience Is Like Building a House

Cultivating resilient character is also similar to building a house. It takes time and is deeply intentional. It cannot wait until we are in the eye of the storm. By then it's too late. We can build our

17. See www.compassionforafrica.org.

house on sand with the cheapest and most convenient materials possible; or we can build on a solid foundation with high-quality materials that will withstand the fiercest of storms. We cannot escape the storms of life, but with God's help and the companionship of others, we can nurture the strength of soul necessary to remain faithful in the midst of them.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that wise people—often those who have lived a little and made some mistakes but have learned from those mistakes—have learned to build their lives on solid rock. Even when it rains, the streams rise, and the winds howl and beat their fists on the house, the house built on rock stands. Not so the foolish. For the foolish, anyplace will do. “This looks to me like as good a spot as any,” they may say. But when the rain is incessant, the waters rise, and the winds rage, the house built on sand is swept away (see Matthew 7:24–27). Jesus's parable reminds me of the story “The Three Little Pigs.” All three pigs build a house. Two foolishly build their houses out of inferior materials. They never pause to ask, “What about the Big Bad Wolf? Will my house protect me if he finds me?”¹⁸ The story of our lives is that the Big Bad Wolf never fails to find us.

We're each building a life. We can be wise or foolish about the life we're building. Will the life we're building stand when the Big Bad Wolf comes knocking? What will happen to our house when the winds howl and the rains beat against it? Will it stand?

Scripture Is a Story of Resilience

From start to finish, the Bible is unashamed of telling story after story of how God's people grew weary, discouraged, distracted, and lost heart on the long journey of faithfulness. I find it life-giving to know we are not the first generation to face hard times. We are not the only ones who have ever wanted to give

18. John Ortberg talks about this topic as well in *Love Beyond Reason: Moving God's Love from Your Head to Your Heart* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 78.

up. If those who have gone before us can persevere, then perhaps so can you and I.

The story of God's people throughout history has largely been one of resilience in the face of tests and trials. Think of how the Israelites find the courage to resist slavery in Egypt; their ability to "sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land" during Babylonian captivity (Psalm 137:4); or the resilience of early Christians enduring persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. The ultimate challenge to resilience for the first disciples was Jesus's crucifixion. Their hopes were crucified along with Jesus. The Roman Empire seemingly proved invincible. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus after the crucifixion reflect the despair of the first disciples, and often ours as well: "But we had hoped" (Luke 24:21a).

Early on Easter morning, the two Marys visit Jesus's tomb, where they meet an angel who tells them a story that is so good it *must* be true: Jesus is not dead but alive! Not able to fully grasp the angel's message, they run away from the tomb "afraid yet filled with joy" (Matthew 28:8). In the midst of their fear and budding excitement, they just so happen to bump into the resurrected Jesus. Daring to believe, the women clasp Jesus's feet and worship him. Filled with living hope, Jesus appoints the Marys to be the first preachers of the resurrection. They tell the male disciples that Jesus is not dead but alive! Word of God raising his Son from the dead quickly spreads—and it hasn't quit spreading for more than two thousand years. Our story as God's people has always been one of resilience in the face of death and despair. As difficult as it is to hope at times, God's people truly are "prisoners of hope" (Zechariah 9:12). What we are going through in our day is another chapter in God's ongoing story of faithful love.

Resilience is thus grounded in resurrection hope. Several years ago I came across this simple statement about hope that I have never forgotten: *Humans can live about forty days without food. Three days without water. Ten minutes without oxygen. But we cannot*

live for one second without hope. Hopelessness is our greatest enemy. Hope energizes us. It's what gets us up and moving in the morning. Hope broadens the horizon from today to tomorrow and beyond. Hope is at the center of Christian faith. Hope is to the Christian what oxygen is to human life. No hope, no resilience. Writing out of his experience of hope in the midst of despair as a prisoner of war during World War II, Jürgen Moltmann speaks of Christian hope as

the power of the resurrection from life's failures and defeats . . . the courage for living which hope quickens in us, so that we can get up again out of our failures, disappointments and defeats, and begin life afresh. No one is perfect, and few people succeed in achieving an unbroken continuity in their lives. Again and again we come up against limits and experience the failure of our plans for life. . . . Christian faith is faith in the resurrection, and resurrection is literally just that: rising up again. It gives us the strength to get up. . . . That is truly the revolutionary power of hope.¹⁹

Resurrection resilience is, as Moltmann so beautifully says, “rising up again.” And, I would add, rising up again and again and again.

Uncertain times can prompt us to search for a better way forward. Crises can be a wake-up call or an opportunity for growth. Pain and disruption are often our best teachers if we're able to lean into them and listen. They can lead us to take inventory of our lives: *What are my priorities? What truly matters? Am I living up to the deepest values of my faith? How can I develop the strength of character to live a life of faith, hope, and love even in the midst of distressing times?* If we are to develop the character to withstand the setbacks and storms that threaten to overwhelm us, we will need as much life flowing *into* us as flows *out* of us.

19. Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End—the Beginning: The Life of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), ix, xi.

The more life there is flowing into us, the greater our strength will be to bounce back, to have a fighting chance to survive both the expected and unexpected storms of life. Giving ourselves this fighting chance will require that we build into our lives certain practices that can help sustain us during dark times. Such practices—what can also be called habits—guide us and hold us fast when we don't know what else to do. Practices and habits of resilience lead to the development of character. Character is like the keel on a sailboat. If we are blown over, the keel helps us to spring back up, to remain buoyant. Character keeps us upright when otherwise we'd remain tipped over and vulnerable to the next wave.

This book is an exploration of the resources of Christian faith that can sustain us during times of trial and temptation. To be resilient requires something from us, as is the case for all the important things we commit ourselves to in life. So how do we harden, steel, strengthen, train, and prepare ourselves for the setbacks of life? There are indeed many practices that can strengthen our character and deepen our root system, and I will talk about many that have been helpful for me while following Christ, but the truth is, there are no easy, pain-free steps toward resilience. Resilience is often messy and unpredictable.

Anne Lamott adds a little humor to what can feel like an overwhelming process:

It's funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools—friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty—and said, *Do the best you can with these, they will have to do.* And mostly, against all odds, they're enough.²⁰

20. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York, Anchor Books, 2000), 103.

INTRODUCTION

Humor nurtures both hope and resilience. Like John Stephen Akhwari, simply staying in the race, no matter how long it takes or how much we may hobble along the way, is what it means to be resilient. In the next chapter, we will look at the importance of Christlike self-love—learning to love ourselves as unconditionally as God does—for running our God-given race well.

FOR REFLECTION

- What practices currently help you remain resilient in the storms of life?
- What practices, relationships, or experiences are saving you these days?
- Who are the mentors (living or dead) who tutor you in faithfulness to Christ and remaining resilient and hopeful during trying times? If you don't have any, consider looking up the writings from some of the names mentioned earlier in this chapter as a starting point.
- How can you help others in your life to be more resilient?
- How deep have you dug your well? Take some time to consider whether it is deep enough to sustain you during difficult times.