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# Spiritual Resilience in American Older Women

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Spiritual Resilience in American  
Older Women

Cadence R. Duke

A Senior Paper  
Submitted to the Psychology Faculty of  
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for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of Behavioral Sciences  
Tulsa, Oklahoma  
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## **Abstract**

The study explores the phenomenology of spiritual resilience, the essence of participants' lived experience, and the meaning of spiritual resilience in participants' lives. Previous studies have shown various definitions and determinants of resilience and spiritual resilience. Five older women associated with the Pentecostal denomination were interviewed, audio recorded, and then transcribed for analysis. These interviews were organized and set into varying categories and qualitatively analyzed based on themes, meanings, experiences, and definitions. Participants defined spiritual resilience as only possible by one's personal day to day relationship with God. The determinants of spiritual resilience can be summarized as the focus on God as sovereign, how he taught participants through various experiences, recognizing participant's need of God, and how he is in control. Furthermore, formational determinants can be interpersonal supports, practices, or behaviors or intrapersonal supports and help to make up spiritual resilience. Future recommendations include more culturally diverse populations, differing belief systems, and wide-ranging ages of women.

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Resilience can be defined in many different ways according to differing paradigms (Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2015; Wormer, Sudduth & Jackson III, 2011). Research argues that resilience can be broadly described as the ability to positively adapt or bounce back despite trial or crisis (Felten & Hall, 2001; Manning, 2012). In order to further narrow the definition of resilience, one would need to study the differing paradigms in which it can be seen. First, resilience can be viewed from a paradigm of personality and is measured by maintaining some degree of self-esteem, well-being, and self-efficacy (Gulbrandsen, 2016; Phillips, Auais, Belanger, Alvarado & Zunzunegui, 2016). Resilience can also be conceptualized through a developmental lens, arguing that resilience is developed by various experiences or crises that one has experienced (Phillips, Auais, Belanger, Alvarado & Zunzunegui, 2016). Finally, resilience can be described from a biological paradigm, which conceptualizes resilience as an ability to overcome severe psychological or physical illness and to maintain a certain level of physical and mental health (Collins & Smyer, 2005). However, for the purposes of this research and to encompass the above paradigms, those who have utilized their own strength to overcome emotional, mental or physical crisis, or trauma are determined to operate in the paradigm of secular resilience. Secular resilience involves drawing independence and strength solely from one's self or one's social community, versus drawing strength from God or spirituality.

The focus on resilience first began when studying the elasticity and adaptability of children (Fleming & Ledogar, 2010). Research argued that most of the determinants of

resilience were focused outside of the child, (Fleming & Ledogar, 2010), but still some researchers argued that resilience is a personality trait that needs to be “properly awakened” from inside the child (Fleming & Ledogar, 2010, p. 1). As researchers took their stances regarding the determinants of resilience, favoring either nature or nurture, many researchers aspired to understand how adolescents responded to difficulty and to discover in what ways children acquire strength (Fleming & Ledogar, 2010). Eventually, research lead to studying resilience with older participants (Fleming & Ledogar, 2010). Through the feminist movement, the scope of resilience was narrowed to studying the diversity among women (Felten & Hall, 2001). After adopting this narrow scope in the research regarding resilience, researchers began to study age, race, class, and gender and the way that external influences affect participants’ experiences and ultimately their resilience (Felten & Hall, 2001). More specifically, outer influences lead to the studying of frailty in order to theorize how and if older women maintained resilience in old age (Felten & Hall, 2001).

The concept of studying older adulthood and if elderly women can maintain a sense of resilience in their lives can be assumed to be counterintuitive (Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000). This is because old age is often associated with illness, difficult loss, frailty, cognitive decline, and traumatic family events (Gooding, Johnson & Tarrier, 2011). Furthermore, older women often cite spirituality as a cornerstone for strength, which is difficult to measure, and is therefore often overlooked in research (Collins & Smyer, 2005; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000). Because of this assumption, older women’s stories have been frequently neglected in the field of science (Ramsey & Blieszner,

2000). The notion that older women face many intense difficulties, and ultimately death, somehow causes women to be weak and unworthy of studying, has been debunked by many researchers (Collins & Smyer, 2005; Hahn, Cichy, Almeida & Haley, 2011; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000; Reynolds, 2016). Instead, researchers have recognized that older women face many significant obstacles in late life, and this could actually lead to forming greater resilience, instead of minimizing it (Peteet & Balboni, 2013).

Furthermore, as women age, many convert to religion to cope with traumatic events. Spirituality is a cornerstone of resilience for many older women (McCauley, Tarpley, Haaz & Bartlett, 2008). This type of resilience in which one practices spiritual beliefs and draws upon these beliefs or religious practices as the most important means for coping is called spiritual resilience.

Spirituality is often deemed as an abstract principle that can be difficult to define due to its many dimensions (Watson, 2011). However, for the purposes of this research, spirituality is defined as a relationship of intimacy with God or a higher power, and relying on this higher power for a primary source of strength. Furthermore, religion, not to be confused with spirituality, for the purposes of this research, is referred to as one's preference of belief in a higher power or God. This could be classified as one's choice of denomination, preference in spiritual institution, and preference of choice to uphold any beliefs and practices as taught by the institution.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This research will explore the phenomenon of spiritual resilience and the correlation of spirituality and resilience in older women, particularly in Oklahoma from



the Sand Springs or Tulsa areas.

### **Research Questions**

1. What characteristics compose spiritual resilience?
2. How do women describe their experiences with spiritual resilience?
3. What are the specific instances in which resilience was practiced, and if not practiced, how did women learn by experience to practice resilience better?

### **Definition of Terms**

**God:** Specifically, is referring to the Trinity, or God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit of the Christian faith in western culture.

**Religion:** Refers to one's preference of belief in a higher power or a god; This could be classified as one's choice of denomination, preference in spiritual institution, and choice to uphold any beliefs and practices as taught by the institution.

**Secular Resilience:** Refers to the mainstream definition of resilience that involves drawing independence and strength from one's self and others versus drawing strength from a god or higher power.

**Spirituality:** Spirituality is defined as being in a relationship of intimacy with God or a higher power, and relying on this higher power for a primary source of strength.

**Spiritual Resilience:** Based on the foundational construct of a spiritual belief or religion and how one acquires strength by drawing upon such belief as a means of coping.

### **Overview of Study**

Chapter I includes the introduction, statement of the problem, research questions, definitions of terms, and an overview of the study. Chapter II will summarize the paradigms of secular and spiritual resilience, review the differing health effects from applying each paradigm, and disclose the determinants of each paradigm. Chapter III will include methods and materials used for this qualitative phenomenological research.

Chapter IV will include data analysis and results. Chapter V will include a summary and discussion of the study in addition to conclusions and recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Development in Older Women**

In order to understand development in late life, it is important to describe the process of aging, and ultimately life-span development (Sokol, 2009). Erikson proposed eight psychosocial stages of development throughout the lifespan (Baltes, 1987). Each psychosocial stage is associated with a conflict that the individual must overcome in order to further development (Sokol, 2009). During post-retirement, women at end of life development now have time to reflect over their lives and either approve or disapprove of their life choices (Baltes, 1987). One can view life in a positive manner, or a negative manner, which can either bring up feelings of shame and regret, or pride and satisfaction. According to previous studies, older women practice spirituality during the end of life phase of development in hopes to find the ultimate meaning and purpose of life and therefore transcend previous life decisions or crises (Langer, 2004; MacKinlay, 2007; Vahia, Depp, Palmer, Fellows, Golshan, Thompson, & Jeste, 2011).

#### **Secular Resilience Defined**

Resilience, as previously discussed, can be broadly defined as a multi-dimensional definition according to differing paradigms. Broadly, secular resilience can be referred to as the placement of help in one's social community, one's self-efficacy, or health to navigate life's circumstances. Secular resilience can be conceptualized in three differing paradigms: personality, development, and biology.

#### **Personality Paradigm**

Secular resilience can be conceptualized as a personality trait, or innate character-

istic, and can be defined as the ability to maintain a certain amount of self-efficacy, self-esteem, or mastery throughout life's hardships (Collins & Smyer, 2005; Felten, 2000; Felten & Hall, 2001; Janssen, Abma, & Regenmortel, 2012; Langer, 2004; Pierini & Stuifbergen, 2012). According to past research, older women can maintain self-esteem and self-efficacy despite frailty, and often can be unaffected by hardships, or even increase their amount of self-esteem and self-efficacy because of crisis (Collins & Smyer, 2005). In this paradigm, secular resilience can be further conceptualized as the amount of control and mastery that one maintains, or attributes to self regardless of circumstances (Langer, 2004), and can be measured based on the degree to which an individual is functioning adaptively (Tomas, Sancho, Melendez, Mayordomo, 2012). This paradigm is centered on the overall self and personality, whether resilience is understood in terms of self-efficacy, mastery, self-ability, or capability to navigate life (Gulbrandenson, 2016), (Langer, 2004).

### **Developmental Paradigm**

The developmental paradigm of secular resilience argues that resilience is developed by experiences or crises that one has experienced throughout the life-span (Phillips, Auais, Belanger, Alvarado & Zunzunegui, 2016). This paradigm specifically argues that older women, even in the midst of tragic diseases such as cancer, can develop a response to the traumatic stress and maintain flexibility and bounce back from life stressors (Boman, Haggblom, Lundman, Nygren & Fisher, 2015; Chang, Chick & Yarnal, 2016; Hahn, Cichy, Almeida & Haley, 2011; Lamond, Depp, Allison, Langer, Reichstadt, Moore & Jeste, 2009; Zhang, Zhang, Zhou & Yu, 2017). Differing from the

personality paradigm, the developmental dimension argues that secular resilience is built throughout the life-span (Gooding, Hurst, Johnson & Tarrier, 2011). Research has disproven the ideology that frailty and turmoil have a negative correlation with resilience (Gooding et al., 2011). When comparing younger women to older women, research has found that older women actually maintain a stronger sense of secular resilience even in the midst of turmoil and frailty due to their extensive experience in navigating life's circumstances (Gooding et al., 2011). In contrast, younger generations obtained lower levels of resilience, due to lack of experience and correct coping mechanisms (Gooding et al., 2011). The developmental lens of secular resilience argues that inner strength is learned through life experiences (Boman et al., 2015; Chang, Chick & Yarnal, 2016; Gooding et al., 2011; Hahn et al., 2011; Lamond, Depp, Allison, Langer, Reichstadt, Moore, Golshan, Ganiats & Jeste, 2008; Zhang, Zhang, Zhou & Yu, 2017).

### **Biological Paradigm**

The biological paradigm can characterize and measure secular resilience through the absence or presence of depression (Boman et al., 2015), or other health issues (Phillips et al., 2016). In a recent study on epigenetics and molecular biology, research argued that experiences can positively or negatively shape a person (Falsetti, Resick & Davis, 2003), and even shape brain development and function (Phillips et al., 2016). Furthermore, any crisis or negative experience can be seen as a disruption not only to the brain, but to an individual's homeostasis (Phillips et al., 2016). In the biological paradigm, secular resilience can be viewed as a mediator between disease and health (Viglund, Jonsen, Strandberg, Lundman & Nygren, 2013). In this specific paradigm, in

order to increase secular resilience, one would need to increase or improve one's overall health condition (Viglund et al., 2013). This paradigm measures and defines secular resilience as the ability to maintain a sense of health, or even self-efficacy, despite crises or trauma (Phillips et al., 2016).

### **Spirituality and Quality of Life**

Spirituality has been referred to as an ignored topic in research. This could be because it is hard to measure, subjective, and multi-dimensional (MacKinlay, 2008; Peteet & Balboni, 2013; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000). Spirituality as a multi-dimensional construct may be hard to define because it can also depend upon one's culture or ethnicity (Walsh, 2009), but broadly, spirituality can be summed up in differing common key words seen across research. These terms are self-transcendence, meaning, purpose, and a relationship with God (MacKinlay, 2008; Manning, 2012). Self-transcendence is referred to as the ability to overcome the limits of self by embracing the conditions of the present and trusting and relying on a supreme being for help (Haugan, Rannestad, Hammervold, Garasen & Espnes, 2012; Manning, 2012). Spirituality is often utilized by women in late life and is referred to as "a pathway to resilience" (Manning, 2012, p. 353) and those that utilize their spirituality in navigating life's hardships are shown to have superior coping methods (McCauley, Tarpley, Haaz & Bartlett, 2008). Furthermore, spirituality is undeniably associated with better health outcomes and a better overall quality of life for those that practice spirituality (McCauley et al., 2008; Peteet & Balboni, 2013). For instance, those that practice spirituality are documented to have fewer mood disorders, avoid depression, and are less likely to utilize medication in the

treatment of mental illness (Hamilton, Moore, Johnson & Koenig, 2013).

### **Spiritual Resilience**

Spiritual resilience can be defined similarly to secular resilience, however instead of the placement of help on the self or family members, it is placed first and foremost on a supreme being, or God. According to research, spiritual resilience adopts a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted definition (MacKinlay, 2008), but strongly urges that problems or experiences can positively transform the mind and help an individual to grow and maintain higher levels of coping skills (Manning, 2012; Kinsel, 2005).

Spirituality can be seen not only as a key construct of spiritual resilience, but also as a very important tool that can be utilized to navigate through hardships and other life experiences with ease (Manning, 2012; Kinsel, 2005). This sense of ease discussed in research can also be defined as the ability to transcend and think of the bigger picture in life (Kinsel, 2005) and therefore maintain spiritual resilience despite circumstances or disabilities (Haugan et al., 2012). Furthermore, some older women have thought that their spirituality and well-being were almost synonymous (Manning, 2012). For example, the characteristic of peace was crucial to some participants as a part of their subjective well-being (Manning, 2012). Spiritual resilience can be attributed to many differing religions, and researchers argue that when studying spiritual resilience, there are more commonalities between different religions than there are differences (MacKinlay, 2008). For the purposes of this research, Christianity will be the main paradigm from which spirituality and spiritual resilience will be explored.

### **Factors of Spiritual Resilience**

The constructs of spiritual resilience can vary widely because they are based on women's subjective experiences, beliefs, and practices. The most common factors of spiritual resilience are social supports, spiritual connections, self-efficacy and locus of control, and life experiences (Gulbrandenson & Walsh, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2013; (Haugan et al., 2012; Kinsel, 2005; Manning, 2012; Peteet & Balboni, 2013; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000; Wormer, Sudduth & Jackson III, 2011).

**Social supports.** The theme of social supports indicates that the community, family support, self-support, and also the extension of self to others help form spiritual strength (Haugan et al., 2012; Kinsel, 2005; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000). The need for social connections for older women is very important, and consists of, getting involved in a local community, having a church community, or attending family gatherings. Furthermore, the relationship with self is very important for forming spiritual strength as well (Haugan et al., 2012). According to research, it is important to practice good self-talk, complete unfinished business or issues that may cause tension in self, and practice good self-reflection about upcoming responsibilities or tasks (Haugan et al., 2012). Finally, the ability to extend knowledge or help to others is a very important type of social support. It is important that elderly women share their wisdom and experiences and give back to younger generations (Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000). According to research, older women enjoy giving and sharing their wisdom (Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000).

**Spiritual connections.** The theme of spiritual connections focuses solely on the relationship with the Christian God and how this relationship can be enriched.



Some research adopts spirituality as only a determinant of spiritual resilience, while others maintain that spiritual resilience is a foundational construct (Felton, 2000; Hamilton et al., 2013; Kinsel, 2005; MacKinlay, 2008; Manning, 2012; Manning, 2014; McCauley, Tarpley, Haaz & Bartlett, 2008; Peteet & Balboni, 2013; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000). Some researchers have found in interviews that Christian women usually cite spirituality not only as a foundational source of spiritual resilience but also attribute it to be an important part of their overall well-being (Manning, 2012). Spiritual resilience, as previously mentioned, can be very subjective and multidimensional in its definition. However, research suggests broadly that the practices of prayer, reading the Bible, and music help enrich participants' relationship with God (Hamilton, Moore, Johnson & Koenig, 2013). Furthermore, research suggests that the enrichment of this relationship with the Christian God and engaging in spiritual practices also enriches subjective well-being (Manning, 2012). The constructs of subjective well-being include peace, hope (Boman et al., 2015), contentment (Manning, 2012), love and the need for social justice, and affect (Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000). The main goal of spiritual resilience ultimately seems to be the ability to maintain a proper relationship with the Christian God, maintain subjective well-being, and to be able to transcend or focus the lens of one's life onto a supreme being instead of their crisis.

**Self-efficacy and locus of control.** The theme of self-efficacy has to do with the belief in oneself and the approach that one adopts to life's circumstances (Boman et al., 2015; Gulbrandson & Walsh, 2015; Kinsel, 2005; Langer, 2004; Wormer et al., 2011). Self-efficacy can be viewed as having confidence, motivation, willpower, and

determination to do a certain act (Boman et al., 2015; Langer, 2004). The internal locus of control can be defined as self-sufficiency (Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2015) and how much control participants have to navigate life's circumstances (Langer, 2004).

Maintaining a level of mastery and self-esteem is an important theme of spiritual resilience, because it is important that participants can act independently and without the need for approval from other people (Boman et al., 2015). Furthermore, it is important for participants to be able to maintain a high internal locus of control and self-esteem so that they can act independently and understand that others may fail them; therefore they should be determined to have trust not only in God but also in themselves. Finally, it is important for participants to have a level of mastery and self-esteem to be able to embrace freedom of choice and not be limited by the status of social norms or what others think (Boman et al., 2015). It is important that older women realize that their level of self-esteem and locus of control is independent from their experiences (Kinsel, 2005) and others, in order to maintain a level of spiritual strength (Boman et al., 2015).

**Life experiences.** This theme suggests that experiences, instead of debilitating older women, can instead be a source of strength for them (Langer, 2004). While experiences can be subjective and vary from person to person (Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2015), one thing that is certain is that everyone has life experiences. When studying older women and their resilience, it is important to note that life experiences and life's obstacles can often help and allow older adults to increase their self-esteem, growth, insight, and virtues (Wormer et al., 2011). Some research argues that life experiences help older women bounce back from difficulties and furthers their growth for future

responses to hardship (Manning, 2012). Because experiences can be utilized as a teaching tool of spiritual resilience, life experiences can therefore be a source of strength that is built throughout the life-span (Langer, 2004).

## **Chapter III**

### **Method**

#### **Design**

Qualitative research can be defined as research that intends to explore a specific subject in order to gain an understanding of the determinants, opinions, or motivations of that particular subject (Smith, 2015). Furthermore, qualitative research includes five possible approaches these include, ethnography, field research, grounded theory, case studies, and phenomenological studies (Smith, 2015). This research, in particular, adopts a phenomenological approach in order to understand a specific phenomenon or occurrence. Phenomenology, unlike other approaches, adopts a philosophical and humanistic view towards research and is based solely on the participant's personal view point of any subject matter or phenomenon and his or her experience with the occurrence (Creswell, 1998). Because of this, phenomenological research often explores participants' intimate and personal experiences having to do with a certain phenomenon. While phenomenological research can be defined as the study of a phenomenon or experience (Smith, 2015), this research more specifically adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which is not only the study of a phenomenon or lived experience, but the meaning of the phenomenon and how participants utilize the experience or phenomenon in their lives (Manning, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). As each participant explores the phenomenon and expresses his or her subjective experiences, the researcher is responsible for obtaining the participant's personal experiences and creating themes to ultimately express the specific beliefs and experiences associated with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

This study attempts to explain the differing experiences of spiritual resilience in older, community-dwelling women living in Sand Springs and Tulsa, Oklahoma. The current research focuses on the experiences of older women and the meaning of their lived experience while utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. This research also applies a person-centered technique in each interview in order to empathize with the older women concerning their life experiences and how participants developed spiritual resilience in their personal lives.

### **Participants**

Five participants were chosen utilizing a purposive approach. Participants were personally invited by the researcher to participate in the study based on how well the researcher knew them and how well they were known to have maintained a level of spiritual resilience despite crisis. Furthermore, nursing home residents were disqualified from participating in this study. Only women who lived independently in the regions of Sand Springs or Tulsa Oklahoma were sought as potential participants. The researcher only included participants whom she had known for at least five years, both to minimize any unnecessary feelings of discomfort and to increase the probability of collecting richer, more detailed data. The sample consisted of five participants from 56-75 years of age and embodied four different ethnicities. All participants identified as Christians and attended the researcher's local church and were associated with the Pentecostal denomination. Four of the five women were retired, and all women were community-dwelling in either Sand Springs or Tulsa, Oklahoma. Education levels ranged from some

high school to an associate's degree in college. Two of the participants were located in Sand Springs, Oklahoma and three of the participants were located in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

### **Procedures**

Data were collected after IRB approval was obtained. Detailed interviews explored each woman's experiences with adversity to define what spiritual resilience meant to them and how they practiced spiritual resilience in their lives. Specifically, these 15- to 180-minute semi-structured interviews were audio recorded in the homes of the participants and later transcribed. Each interview began with a description of the research purpose and how participants had the choice to skip questions or abandon the interview at any time. All interview questions were open-ended, which encouraged the participants to share both their opinions and their experiences with the phenomenon of spiritual resilience. Furthermore, throughout the interviews the researcher practiced an empathy technique using the person-centered approach created by Carl Rogers (Arnold, 2014). This technique strives to provide participants with a comfortable atmosphere when expressing often troubling experiences with the researcher.

After the interviews, the debriefing process began. In the debriefing process, the researcher personally called every participant and reviewed each transcription and each corresponding theme to ensure validity. Each participant was invited to add further experiences to their transcription or remove experiences they did not feel comfortable including. Furthermore, participants were also allowed to help the researcher name each

theme to ensure the validity and preciseness of the data that represented their experiences and beliefs.

### **Analysis**

Before the researcher began each interview, the participants, their family members, and any community organizations affiliated were given pseudonyms to ensure privacy. Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed and coded the data by finding common themes and key-words or phrases. The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview format, using research questions supported with past literature. Twenty-six themes emerged, including major themes and subthemes. After coding was complete, the triangulation stage of analysis began. The researcher went through two different phases of triangulation. The first stage consisted of calling each participant and reading each of her answers to her. This was done to ensure the validity of each relative theme. Changes were made based on their disapproval of any theme or data collected. The second stage of triangulation consisted of sorting through the collected data with a faculty advisor and gaining her approval of each theme, subtheme, and to ensure the correct representation of the participants. Each major theme and subtheme was then compared to the literature regarding the topic of spiritual resilience and deemed significant (Collins & Smyer, 2005; Haugan, Rannestad, Hammervold, Garasen & Espnes, 2011; Langer, 2004; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000).





## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

#### **Significant Experiences and Themes**

This research utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to discover the meaning of spiritual resilience and participants' experiences and interaction with the phenomenon of spiritual resilience. Themes were formed based on participants' experiences, definitions, experiences, and interactions with spiritual resilience. When discussing the definition of spiritual resilience, participants strongly believed that a relationship with God is a cornerstone of spiritual resilience. Furthermore, major themes were discovered when discussing the determinants of spiritual strength and can be categorized in two major themes: God is sovereign and formational strength.

#### **Spiritual Resilience Defined**

This small category consists of the foundational definition of spiritual resilience as perceived by participants, which is needed before discussing further determinants or experiences of spiritual resilience. Spiritual resilience as portrayed by participants is possible through their personal relationship with God. This definition can be broken down into two subthemes: (1) God as a Source and (2) God as Provider.

#### **God as a Source**

The first discussed theme is the ultimate reliance on God, his teachings, and the realization that he is present with participants' during life their experiences. Furthermore, this theme describes God as an unshakeable, all knowing, and omniscient God.

Acknowledging that God is a perfect source in times of trouble helps encourage

participants to trust and rest in who God is and therefore allows participants to transcend their difficulties.

Spiritual strength is knowing you can, knowing you can rely on God for anything that means that you, you know where your source comes from. (Penny, 56)

Spiritual strength, I don't know how anybody can go through anything without him, without Christ. (Kay 71)

But when it gets right down to it, God is the one that gets you through it. Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit are the ones that get you through everything in life. (Nancy, 70)

Spiritual strength comes from the Bible of course, and uh, when you uh, when you learn the word of God, when you learn who you are in Christ Jesus, then I think you become stronger, and things that you go through will make you stronger of a Christian. (Blondie, 71)

Later in her interview when speaking about God, Kay added,

You know, I just, I wouldn't be anywhere without Christ. I wouldn't be anywhere without God. (Kay, 71)

Participants argue that relying on God, realizing that he makes all things possible in their lives and is always there to help them through various life experiences, helps form spiritual resilience. The next theme to be discussed is God as Provider.

### **God as Provider**

This theme is focused on participants' strong belief that spiritual resilience comes from having divine support from God and understanding that God not only sees and knows the participants and their circumstances, but will provide for them in their time of need. Divine support can be characterized as knowing God will provide for participants in their time of need. When speaking of how God helped her to find herself after a verbally abusive marriage, Kay stated,

Because I, I was born with a strong spirit that I lost completely but then began to rebuild it again when, when, with God's help every step along the way. (Kay, 71)

I think it's quietness. I think that it's, you have that faith in here, inside in your heart and your mind. I think the quietness knowing you have assurance that God's going to take care of everything. He's going to take care of me, he's going to take care of my family, and just uh, it's quietness-assurance that everything's okay. (Louise, 75)

Each woman believed that God is the ultimate and unshakable source in times of need, and trusted that he would take care of them. Furthermore, each participant agreed that the personal day to day relationship and reliance, trust, or confidence in God are foundational for defining spiritual strength.

### **Determinants of Spiritual Strength**

The determinants or factors of spiritual resilience are elements that promote spiritual resilience or help form spiritual resilience as argued by participants based on their personal experience and relationship with God. The factors of spiritual resilience can be broken down into two major themes: (1) God is sovereign and (2) formational activities.

#### **God is Sovereign**

This theme contains four subthemes: (1) God teaches through experiences, (2) God is there, (3) I need God, and (4) God is in control. The first category to be discussed is how God utilizes life experiences to teach a person.

#### **God Teaches Through Experiences**

This subtheme encompasses participants' beliefs that experiences can be used as tools of teaching and therefore ultimately increase spiritual strength. This subtheme can be categorized into two categories: (a) life experiences, and (b) supernatural experiences.

**Life experiences.** This category encompasses participants' own life experiences and opinions about how experiences can help or inhibit the formation of spiritual resilience.

I think their life experiences make them strong. Well everything you have to live through, I mean you haven't faced a certain thing, then you're pretty, I hate to say, use the word shallow, but you're just unlearned on that. (Penny, 56)

When speaking of Kay's own view on learned behaviors, she stated,

You know you learned respect one way or another, you know stuff like that so nobody was born on how to do that, nobody was born on how to work that thing, (pointing to the researcher's computer) you weren't, you weren't born on how to play a piano or anything like that you learned, everything in life, is learned, and that can be good or bad. (Kay, 71)

When speaking of building her faith, Louise added,

Our faith is built on our experiences and through the word. When we trust God, trust God with what's, what's happening just like a block when building a house, you take one cement, one brick and another brick and another brick and you build that faith and without faith we couldn't please God. (Louise, 75)

I think it's the things you go through, that make you stronger. I think that uh, not that a trial, not that trials are there for that, but when you do go through a trial and you're on uh so to speak, in the valley I think at that time you're seeking God more and when you come out of, of a situation then you are stronger, I think you're stronger in that particular area and I think that it makes you a stronger person. (Blondie, 71)

Not every woman believed that life experiences are correlated with the phenomenon of spiritual resilience. When asked if experiences form spiritual strength, Nancy stated,

No because every experience in life is different you can't, you can't uh, experience every problem in life, they're all different. One, one problem one human problem and another human trying to solve that problem doesn't ever really work. It changes for everybody. For as many people as there are there's different problems people deal with problems differently. Different things are problems for people and other people are thinking why are you sweating that? (Nancy, 70)

**Supernatural experiences.** Participants have also recorded supernatural experiences that helped show and teach them various lessons in life. Penny shared her experience when struggling with her newborn baby. She maintained,

I was running a fever and he was crying and screamin' and I remember just going in that bathroom in there and shutting the door, my husband was home so he was with the kids and I was just thinking "God I cannot do this, I cannot do this I just physically cannot," and I just remember crying and praying and praying in tongues and I got such a peace and realized, I've really have always know that that's my, where my strength comes from. (Penny, 56)

Kay, who lost a child in a car accident, shared her interesting supernatural experience and how it provided closure and healing for her,

I know where Rob is from the moment that that pickup took his life that and God has shown me that he's sent him to talk to me in my dreams and one time I could even feel his, allowed I felt his body even though his body was no longer you know his body is not in heaven, but when he came to me he would, he would talk to me and I would put my arm around him and things like that you know. (Kay, 71)

She shared that her daughter, had stated that if her brother would not stop drinking and driving that it was going to take his life. She went on to share her daughter's supernatural experience and how it provided healing to her,

She said she kept having dreams that she was trying to pull him out of the pickup but she came down that day and she was just, she says Rob came and talked to me last night and he told me to quit crying and to quit being sad because he was good, he said he was fine and that he was where he needed to be, and he said so don't carry that. (Kay, 71)

Louise, as she was feeling depressed one day, shared her supernatural experience and how it helped her out of a depression,

I don't remember what it was but I was in the bed sitting up and I had my Bible and I was looking for scriptures for encouragement and all of a sudden, I felt this, felt like a warm blanket. I've never had that experience before, but God sent, he

wrapped his I can feel the warmth, you know it was in summer, wasn't in the summer time, and it wasn't winter time, but the different kind of warmth that just put a blanket around me and I didn't want him to leave, and uh, anyway is that, that experience I never will forget that experience either, then he just wrapped his arms around me and it just felt like a warm, warm blanket. (Louise, 75)

Blondie, who was at work one day helping a woman struggling in her marriage, felt the

Lord speak to her and help teach her to be more loving to her children. She stated,

They'd be having an affair and be doing this and I could just reach out and just love them and tell them that God's going to help you, and they'd be hurting and crying and this that and the other and I'd say, I'd be talking to them, and he, he said "you, you don't treat your children that way." So, I changed, changed me, that changed me and so I began to talk to my children and uh, treat them the way I would treat the others. (Blondie, 71)

Nancy mentioned that she hears God talking to her regularly, and it teaches and helps her.

She maintained that God does,

Everything from calling my name, or telling me which way that he wants me to go. (Nancy, 70)

Although not every woman shared the same experience, all participants believe and have reported instances in which they felt or heard God speaking to them and teaching them.

### **God is There**

This subtheme is focused on the participants' acknowledgment of God and how he is always there for them in times of need. This subtheme consists of three categories: (a) God provides hope, (b) God talks to us, and (c) assurance from God.

**God provides hope.** The first category to be discussed is God provides hope.

This encompasses participants' expression of their need for God and the hope that God provides them. When speaking of God, Kay added,

Without him I can't, you know, without him I can't even imagine, I can't imagine anybody, but I will tell you, anybody, that I don't know anybody survives losing a child, unless, unless they have, they know where that child is. (Kay, 71)

Nancy, when speaking of her hope to experience heaven, stated,

I have to live here on earth and I have to put up with all the stuff earth has to offer, but I know in the end it's going to be glorious. (Nancy, 70)

Blondie, when talking about her daughter's wreck, maintained,

All things work together for the good of those who love the Lord. There was a time when she got into a wreck and she believed something good was going to happen to her through whatever happens. (Blondie, 71)

I had a daughter with asthma when my husband and I were overcoming cancer. God do you really love me? When I was faced with the unknown, I had to have hope that God loves me. (Louise, 75)

Penny, when speaking of dropping her husband off to seek professional help, added,

I just had to drive away and leave him in the professional's hands and trust that it was all going to work out. (Penny, 56)

Every participant described the unknown circumstances in life, whether it be experiencing what heaven would be like, devastating accidents, or other circumstances. Every woman expressed that they are looking forward to a positive outcome in whatever circumstance they may face.

**God talks to us.** This next category to be discussed is God talks to us. This category speaks of participants' experience of God communicating to them in often intimate ways. Kay, when speaking about her humorous experience with her hair, stated,

Anyway, I'm standing there yack, yack, yacking griping because of my hair and all of this sort of stuff and then I'm not saying anything I was just getting ready and I hear this little, it was just like this little voice said, "I didn't give everybody a sense of humor. I didn't give everybody, I didn't give everybody a sense of humor" and I went, "I'm, just and I went okay." So, he was telling me quit it, that

everybody's different. Somebody has more hair than I do but they don't have the sense of humor, or something like that, but it was, it, it got my attention. (Kay, 71)

I told Bill that I wanted to stay out in the car just wanted to pray and just be quiet for a while. So, I went and I said, "God do you really love me? Do you really love me? While I had this cancer?" And all of a sudden, a car pulled up in front of me it had parked and on the back of it, had, had had a picture, when kids paint things on the back of cars, it says I love you, within minutes it left, and I said thank you God, I know you love me and I had peace since then. (Louise, 75)

Blondie, speaking of an occurrence with her husband, added,

He knew how to do that he knew how to drive he knew how to do all that but see I was treating him as a kid, and he wouldn't, he didn't say anything and one day out of the blue he said, "honey I can do that, I can drive" he said, "I know we're going to turn down here." But God had already dealt with me 2 or 3 times, quit telling him to do that, quit telling him to do that and then when he said that, and God had to just change me and when he changed me everything started working out better in our family. (Blondie, 71)

My mom had a nervous breakdown and closed all her doors, God spoke to me and asked me one thing that he could do for me and I said I want you to heal my mama. (Louise, 75)

**Assurance from God.** The next category to be discussed is assurance from God.

This category speaks of participants' experiences in which God kept them from giving up. Penny, when talking about her husband's struggle with addiction, maintained,

Mm. I guess my faith helped me from just walking away and just chunking my marriage and saying it's not all, any of it's worth it. Because, I um, made a commitment you know, when I got married, for better or for worse and even if it was for worse, I just trusted God that it would get better, you know. (Penny, 56)

You're either going to throw it all away, or you're gonna, you're gonna take care of your, your, your, your temptation. Every time there was something like that you just want to crawl up in bed and pull the covers over your head. But you can't do that, a lot of people can do it, I'm not one that can do that. (Kay, 71)

I think it's step by step you know each thing you go through, you trust God. "Well God you can help me, God you're going to take care for this", you have faith that God loves you. (Louise, 75)



If you have faith you can't give up, your faith is there. Everything I look at, God is in it, I know it's a gift from God, accept it because that's what the Bible tells me. (Nancy, 70)

Faith keeps you from giving up for sure. If you have an attack on your body and it's not curable? Faith, if you have faith in God and in his word and if you truly believe that then that healing will manifest. Faith in God's word keeps you from giving up and thinking you would have a disease or sickness your whole life. (Blondie, 71)

Every woman essentially believed that faith can be used to fight and have endurance in her life. This endurance can be utilized in relationships, temptations, circumstances, or disease. Faith helps participants to overcome the hardships of life. The next subtheme to be discussed is I need God.

### **I Need God**

This subtheme is focused on the weaknesses and stories participants have shared and can be further categorized into three categories: (a) sometimes things are too hard to bear, (b) understanding you're human, (c) not putting all hope in people, and (d) humility. The first discussed category is sometimes things are too hard to bear.

**Sometimes things are too hard to bear.** This category encompasses participants' hardships, or crises, in which they either struggled in their faith, or struggled maintaining spiritual resilience. Penny added,

Well maybe when my daddy died. That was probably when, I would say If I have ever failed anything in my life looking back on it it's kind of how I didn't have good resilience during that period in time. I just couldn't go deal with it. (Penny, 56)

Kay, speaking of a time when she was angry with God for what she had gone through, maintained,

But that's good I hung up on him. I'm just turning my back now. I said "God

would you not just look down; would you do something?" (\*laughs). Somebody was telling me the other day that they said, "oh gosh I'm just ready for him to do something I'm just waiting," and I said, "you know I went through that same thing" you just want him to and but you got to keep hanging in. (Kay 71)

Louise, when speaking of a very painful experience of miscarriage, stated,

But uh, anyway the scripture came to me um, when Jesus was in the boat when they were going through the storm and the disciples woke him up and said "God do you care if I perish? Do you care if I die? If we die?" And he got up and looked at the water and said, "peace be still." I said, "God if you can do that to the water you can do it for me," and I quit, I didn't cry anymore God gave me such peace and uh and the next morning, well a couple of days later I miscarried. (Louise, 75)

**Understanding you're human.** This category focuses on understanding participants' own weaknesses and therefore relying on God for strength. When speaking of her Christian lifestyle, Penny added,

There's never been a time in my life, that I've not been um, in church or you know, have a relationship with God, now has there been times that I haven't been perfect absolutely but I've always known where my strength comes from. (Penny, 56)

You really, you know he says wait, and you know when you try to do it yourself it's not going to turn out but if you wait on God's saying, which we all don't all, and I haven't always, you know I'll think that was a great idea and it wasn't a good idea. Uh, no waiting on God that's the only way it's going to, because he knows what is best. (Kay, 71)

When speaking of God, Nancy maintained,

I'm not perfect and that's where my salvation comes in, whatever strength I have in me comes from him. (Nancy, 70)

The scripture says all things are possible to those who believe. I had no confidence in myself, I told God he had to lead it, he brought me a clientele. The windows of heaven opened and I realized that I couldn't have done any of that on my own, but through God it's possible. (Blondie, 71)

I stood upon his promises, even when Bill was gone, I was by myself, I was praying for them. I was used to my husband Bill going with me. In my weakness of my husband not going with me, I relied on God. (Louise, 75)

**Not putting all hope in people.** This category encompasses the participants' realization that not only are they themselves imperfect, but also others are imperfect too. This helped the women further place their hopes and dreams solely in God. Louise, when speaking of her entire family having swine flu, stated,

He was sick, the girls were home sick and all three of them in the bed and Bill's mom at the time had a little grocery store not too far from us so I went there and got some soup or something, I forgot what I went down there for. Well one of our friends was there, he was one of our friends too she said, "how's the girls?" and I said, "they're sick, Bill's sick" and she looked at me and said, "you're going to be sick next", yeah, I said, "no I'm not going to be sick I can't be sick." (Louise, 75)

Um, certainly not going to get spiritual guidance from man. Your spiritual guidance comes from God, Jesus the father, Jesus and the holy spirit for me. (Nancy, 70)

Nancy then revisited the subject later by adding,

You can take advice from people but it doesn't mean that it's good. So, and he, he never fails me. (Nancy, 70)

It's the truth. Spiritual leaders helped and counseled, but you don't put everything in them, but you don't put all your hope in them. If it brings peace it's from God, if not don't believe it. (Blondie, 71)

When speaking of her husband's addiction, Penny maintained,

That was the experience with Sam because he was my rock, but I realized that he's human when he got hooked on painkillers, that he needed professional help, that he needed professional help, that he couldn't do it on his own. He messed up, but we all mess up, we're human. (Penny, 56)

Participants had many different experiences but ended up agreeing that even though people can be helpful, they are human. Therefore, participants would rather place their

ultimate trust and confidence in God rather than in people. The next category to be discussed is humility.

**Humility.** According to participants, having humility and letting God lead and help them through certain experiences or traumas, helps form spiritual resilience. When speaking of her daughter, Louise stated,

She could have gone with these other kids that went to these big churches that had things going on, things for the youth, but she had been you know, she knew we worked in the church, in small churches and she said I want to do something, to play the piano for them. (Louise, 75)

When speaking of her relationship with her children, Blondie added,

But see I changed and when I changed, then God changed them and then God just worked everything out and we have such a wonderful, wonderful relationship. (Blondie, 71)

Eventually God will do what he wants to do. Sometimes, I think I can fix it, but I come to the realization that I can't and that I need to give it to God. (Nancy, 70)

When my daddy was preaching I would go sing in tiny churches and people would ask why I wasn't doing bigger stuff, but I just wanted to help my daddy minister. (Penny, 56)

Each woman agreed that it was very important for God to lead their lives and depended on his strength and not their own. This humility, participants agreed, helped to form spiritual strength.

### **God is in Control**

This subtheme is focused on the faith that participants have in God and can be categorized into two different categories: (a) God sees the big picture, and (b) personal walk with God.

**God sees the big picture.** This category encompasses participants' realization that not everything is going to happen the way that they want it to. Despite this, they can find hope in knowing that God knows their lives. When speaking of her life plans, Penny stated,

Know things might not work out the way you want them to, but they will work out the way God wants them to. (Penny, 56)

She goes on to mention,

When you have spiritual strength, I think you're more um, probably more able to accept things more, not blame God for things that don't go maybe your way, because your, your, your strength, you're strong in like your faith, and so um, you just trust that he has the right answers, he has the right avenues for you. (Penny, 56)

Kay, after months of not hearing from her daughter, shared,

I couldn't take it anymore and I literally went into the spare bedroom and laid my face on the floor and said, "God she was yours before she was mine you know where she is and I turn her in, she is yours and I am releasing her to you." And it wasn't 3 weeks later I got a phone call from my mother asking if I knew, if I'd heard from Susie, and I said no, and she said, "well I just got a phone call from her that that she's in a in a recovery place in Florida and they have 2 weeks before they're allowed to call anybody." (Kay, 71)

I had my eyes closed I said, "God what's next?" and that's when the peace just come over me, he knows what's next, we didn't know but we knew that God was with us during that time. (Louise, 75)

Later on, Louise added,

You know things that he's done for me, you know helped me through things that are things that some people would have a nervous breakdown about, some of the things that have happened, but just like just building and loving God because he sees the big picture, he sees the big picture. (Louise, 75)

Pick the matter, pick a moment, pick a time, he was there. He knew, he knew how to comfort me when no one else did. (Nancy, 70)

Blondie, when speaking of her ex-husband, maintained,

Made commitment, “God I’m going to serve you if he comes back or not.” I am praying, God is in control regardless if my husband comes back or not. God is in control daily, it’s a daily process, surrender your problems to him. (Blondie, 71)

Every woman mentioned an area where they knew God had to be in control. With this recognition, participants embraced that God saw the bigger picture. It helped them cope through very difficult times in their lives.

**Spiritual walk with God.** This category focuses on participants’ relationship with God and how it is a key factor in forming spiritual resilience. More importantly a personal relationship is not necessarily defined as just going to church, but walking out one’s faith and exercising one’s faith in daily. According to participants, exercising one’s faith can be either reading the Bible, praying, or even singing songs to God.

What forms spiritual strength is um, having a relationship with God. I’m not talking about just a, um, Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night relationship. (Penny, 56)

Kay explained her difficulties of having a relationship with God after the loss of her husband,

We’re still there and, and, now I look back on it and I see that his obedience to God was leading him to prepare for his passing, for him not being here. It was, he left me in a great place. Relying on God didn’t come overnight you know it was just a gradual, it didn’t come overnight. (Kay 71)

Kay then stated,

It’s your daily relationship with him, you know, listening to the word. You know it’s getting in God’s word is what I believe it’s just that relationship that you would have with him and the more that you get in the word and the more you, um, get into, try him I guess. In your day to day walk, um, the stronger you’ll become because you know he just doesn’t fail you, you know? (Kay, 71)

Hmm. I think it’s faith in God in our everyday, everyday experiences. It’s an everyday thing, you get up and you have, it’s our faith in God that is resilient. It’s

a personal thing it's just you and God, you know just have a special place just you and God, uh, I think that just, but as you get older things are going to get some more difficult and I think that's when you need God to help. (Louise, 75)

My strength comes from him and him alone. I am nothing without him. (Nancy, 70)

Nancy, when asked what she thought defined spiritual strength, mentioned,

Your personal relationship with Jesus and the assurance that he gives us. (Nancy, 70)

Based on the data gathered, each participant emphasizes the need for a personal relationship with God in order to correctly navigate life's hardships and develop spiritual strength. The formational practices introduced in this chapter, which include reading the Bible, praying, and singing songs to God will be addressed later in the subtheme Practices or Behaviors.

### **Formational Determinants of Spiritual Strength**

This category contains three subcategories: (1) interpersonal supports, (2) practices or behaviors, and (3) intrapersonal supports. The first category to be discussed is interpersonal supports and how participants can utilize social outlets in their time of need.

#### **Interpersonal Supports**

This specific subtheme is focused on the social supports that participants utilized that help to form spiritual strength in their lives. Interpersonal supports can be categorized into five different categories: (a) professional help, (b) loving others, (c) family support, (d) Christian friends, and (e) church family. The first category to be discussed is professional help.

**Professional help.** This category encompasses participants' experiences with seeking counselors or psychologists that helped them to overcome crises, to think of things differently, and therefore promote spiritual strength in their lives. When speaking of mending her relationship with her husband, Penny stated,

Um, I went through some counseling, I went through some counseling and that helped a lot, and, uh, just, prayer. You know, study, um, talking with him and seeing how he feels. Talking about his experience, that helped me grow in my experience, to understand things a little bit better, why they happened the way that they did. (Penny, 56)

I had two other children that I had to be strong for. You know? And then, the fear and, and, then the anxieties and everything it went through with my daughter and stuff like that its, its, just uh your mind is just anyway. I have counseling at the VA but I have a Christian counselor, isn't that amazing? (Kay, 71)

**Loving others as a determinant of resilience.** This category highlights the importance of sharing experiences and love with other people that might be experiencing the same occurrence. Penny, when talking about helping her husband overcome his addiction, stated,

We're just now to a point to where we are sharing with people. You know, I said, "you really need to share because there are a lot of people going through that same situation." (Penny, 56)

Kay when speaking of a church she visited, mentioned,

God is love so how can there not be love there? My ex-in laws, my first husband they were the same way, they were Baptist and they didn't have love for people, but they had all these rules and regulations on what was wrong to do. (Kay, 71)

She went on to state,

If I can make people feel good, if I can make people laugh, I'm good, I'm good. (Kay, 71)

Louise, when discussing qualities of faith, stated,



But quietness and being able to share what God's done for you and how he gave you, you know faith during my cancer treatment. (Louise, 75)

Louise later spoke about an example of why loving others is important. She spoke of an older couple who blessed her life, stating,

My mom and dad didn't go to church another couple that picked us up for church they picked us up every Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night. They loved us and they went out of their way extra to pick us up. My brothers my sisters were probably 'cuz we didn't have car seats, car seat belts then but they took the time and to make sure we went to church and Sunday school and they, they were, faithful. (Louise, 75)

Also, Nancy when discussing the importance of loving others, stated,

Um, God showed us, he showed us, and told us and taught us how to love and follow his guidance. (Nancy, 70)

Blondie when speaking of her children, added,

I started treating them differently and started speaking the word of God into them, which I, I would always do anyway, uh, I would just speak the word of God into them and tell them how much Jesus loves them and that he's going to help them do this and he's going to help you do that and I would speak the word of God into them and then that healed our relationship, it healed the thing. (Blondie, 71)

Participants deemed loving others and pouring into others to be an important characteristic of resilience.

**Family support.** This category represents participants' love for their family and how they provide support in their lives. Penny stated,

So that moving away, helped me and then, my sister has been a lot of help for me throughout all of my life, she's probably, she's probably been really more like a mom to me more than my own mom in the fact that if I had questions about raising children, or health issues, or just any, any type of health question whatsoever, that I'd ever want to ask, she would just um, let me come to her and she would be totally honest with me and she wouldn't beat around the bush, I mean she would give me her honest opinion and her honest answer and uh, so she's helped me a lot in my 56 years of life. (Penny, 56)

My kids were allowed to have a life of the sports, life you know just and uh they never doubted how much I loved them and um, that was important to me that they were the most important things you know besides God. (Kay, 71)

Surely you have your support from your family that loves you and you love them and that's what God wants you to have. (Nancy, 70)

When speaking of her children, Blondie maintained,

Like, they'll call me and talk to me about their jobs and all that type of thing, it's beautiful, but you know if I hadn't have changed, they wouldn't have. I think they would've just going on away. (Blondie, 71)

Louise, when talking about her family, stated,

When I was having surgery, they were always encouraging and praying for me through my surgery, they were there, always there. (Louise, 75)

**Christian friends.** This category encompasses the need of Christian friends to uplift and help provide encouragement for one another. Kay stated,

Uh, yeah, where you know where he is, and God gives you the strength and Christian friends. (Kay, 71)

Nancy, when speaking of God, added,

I think he wants your family around you and your friends around you to give you moral support. (Nancy, 70)

Christian friends are a must. I think God puts Christian friends in your life and there are times when you need to get things off your heart. The word talks about bearing each other's burdens, they pray together and believe together. Christian friends are important. (Blondie, 71)

Friends can encourage us. We're not on the mountaintop all the time and we need friends, good Christian friends to encourage us. (Louise, 75)

Yes, because when my dad stopped preaching my mom took me to a bigger church when I was a teenager and in the youth group I was able to, to have Christian friends, that made me stronger because it helped me hunger for more of God. (Penny, 56)

Participants all believed that God places friends in their lives to help sharpen, encourage, and help them along. The final category in the theme of interpersonal supports is the church family.

**Church family.** This category speaks about the importance of knowing like-minded believers of God and how they help form spiritual strength in participants' lives. Furthermore, unlike the category of Christian friends, this category focuses on the unification of the body of Christ and the mutual edification that is experienced when attending church. Kay, when speaking of seeking prayer from the researcher's parents, maintained,

I knew that when your parents stood up there, that was where I was going, and it made all the difference in the world in my spirit. You know what, I wasn't such a bad... Because I would think, you don't know who I am because we all think the worst of us, if anyone really knew who I was. (Kay, 71)

I had people at church to encourage me, you know I was growing up and then Bill and I have to encourage each other. (Louise, 75)

Your church family is a big part of your life. When Marshall got sick, they had a 24-hour prayer and always called and checked, and prayed, and loved us and stood with us through it. I am on the prayer team, the church is one body, when one person hurts, they all hurt. (Blondie, 71)

I know your church family won't judge you, they'll take your problems as their own. They want you to be on your happy side too, they'll pray for you and if you're close enough, you won't have to say a lot, because they'll know the need. (Nancy, 70)

Yeah, your church family makes me stronger when I got into a bigger church with the youth, when I saw what relationship they had with Christ, I wanted mine to grow stronger too. (Penny, 56)

Each participant expressed that there are different interpersonal, or social supports that can help her have a stronger relationship with God and help support her in the midst of trials.

### **Practices or Behaviors**

This subtheme describes the different spiritual practices that help enrich participants' relationship with God. This subtheme consists of four categories: (a) faithfulness, (b) Christian music, (c) prayer, and (d) reading the Bible. The first category to be discussed is the importance of faithfulness.

**Faithfulness.** This category describes participants' belief that faithfulness to serving God, going to church, and in general life tasks help form spiritual strength.

Penny stated,

I think consistency in their walk forms spiritual strength. (Penny, 56)

I was about 10 and I said, "dad I don't feel like going to Sunday school today and I said do I have to go?" And he's just reading the newspaper, he said "no you don't have to go" and then come about 2 o'clock in the afternoon I went in and said, "dad can I go Joyce's house?" And he goes "no", and I said, "why not?" He said, "if you can't go to church you're not going anywhere else." I learned a big lesson out of that. (Kay, 71)

Louise when speaking of her Sunday school teacher who had just lost a loved one, stated,

But he had faith and uh, he broke down a time or two he, but he thought of us and he came to teach our Sunday school class and that faith, I said if he can do that I can too, no matter you know in our, you know we, we, go to church no matter what and if we're sick and got a fever we stay home. (Louise, 75)

Nancy when speaking of God, stated,

Following his guidance. Um, he showed us, he showed us, and told us and taught us how to love and following his, his guidance gives you gives you. I mean he told us everything that we need to know. He told us everything that he knows. (Nancy, 70)

Well I think I'm faithful and I think you know being faithful helps you be stronger and more resilient. (Blondie, 71)

Participants strongly believe that faithfulness in their walk with God and consistency to servanthood of their local church is very important to them and helps to form spiritual strength. The next category to be discussed is the importance of music.

**Christian music.** This category encompasses either worship music or regular Christian music that helps spiritually strengthen participants. When speaking of her experience with worship music, Kay added,

Then all at once you hear this lyric that maybe you've been singing that song for forever but that lyric will just knock you out. And then yeah. I just love music it's just I grew up in a house with all sorts of music and stuff like that that has always been my, I love music that's another thing that can strengthen you. (Kay, 71)

Louise when speaking of her grandmother, stated,

She liked to sing Christian songs and she would sing and I was sitting there and she had me in a little rocking chair. All the other grandkids would be out playing, but I would follow her around, sing these songs, it's implanted when I was young. (Louise, 75)

I think that hymns, I think they stir they holy spirit in your soul, bring you closer to God and being closer to God makes you stronger. (Nancy, 70)

When I was, gosh, probably in third grade, I felt the desire to play the piano. A lady prayed for me and it helped me to realize that God will give you the desires of your heart. Music gave me self-confidence and conversation skills and that was really how my whole ministry developed was because of that. (Penny, 56)

A lot of participants had an emotional and spiritual connection to worship music and others longed to hear and play music in order to praise God. Some participants argue that worship music ushers in God's Holy spirit, which then can help participants be spiritually resilient. The next category to be discussed is prayer.

**Prayer.** This category encompasses how participants speak to God and how it helps them be spiritually resilient. Kay, when speaking of her new job, maintained,

That's when I learned that you be specific with God because there was nothing on my job description that said anything about sitting down. So, I tell people you be specific with God and tell him what you want. (Kay, 71)

When asking Penny what helps her be spiritually resilient, she argued,

My prayer language for sure, for sure. (Penny, 56)

Blondie, when speaking of herself and her husband, added,

We had to stand on the word, it's God's word that will bring you through, that's, that's, I think that's where your faith is, it has to be in the word of God and it's in prayer. (Blondie, 71)

Yeah, it's conversation time with God. It's just talking to God like you talk to a friend or father. You see if he gives you answer you want or not. You can talk to him verbally or in your mind, but it's pretty simple, like breathing air. (Nancy, 70)

As participants shared, prayer is simply speaking to God. Participants also believed that praying, either silently or aloud, helps to form spiritual strength. The final category in the subtheme of practices of behaviors is reading the Bible.

**Reading the Bible.** This category focuses on the importance of reading the Bible and how this practice forms spiritual strength.

It's a daily relationship with him, you know, communing with him and um reading his word and um listening to the word. You know it's getting in God's word is what I believe it's just that relationship that you would have with him and the more that you get in the word and the more you, um get into, you try him I guess. In your day to day walk um, the stronger you'll become, become because you know he just doesn't fail you. (Penny, 56)

Of course, your time with the Lord is. In his word getting in his word is your biggest that's your biggest thing I think. Well I have one bible that I read now and it's the new living translation, I love that. I bought it for my aunt because she wanted it and then she passed away and I, and I was in charge of all of her stuff and so I like it because you can just read it like, but my Bible for its own um,

highlighted and then um but then when you're going through a certain walk, you're reading this scripture that you may have read 1500 times and you go how long has that been in their God? You know, it's just so strange how you've got it all, you've had it before but he's his word is there for what you need at that time. (Kay, 71)

I couldn't be sick so that's another you know I got mad at the devil several times and had to quote scripture you know like when my daughter had the asthma we anointed her with oil and that's a symbol of the holy spirit you cannot and you will not come past that you cannot touch her anymore. (Louise, 75)

I think that's where your faith is it has to be in the word of God and it's in prayer. (Blondie, 71)

He gives us instructions in the Bible. How do you know what to do if you don't read his word? The Bible is the truth and if you want to know the truth then you need to read it. (Nancy, 70)

Participants strongly believed that reading the Bible is one of the best practices to foster spiritually resilience. According to participants, reading the Bible serves as both a way to strengthen one's relationship with God and also a way to increase their spiritual awareness and spiritual strength.

### **Intrapersonal Supports**

This subtheme is focused on participants' core sense of self and describes the different ways that one can show self-love or self-support and how it increases spiritual resilience. This subtheme consists of five categories: (a) the importance of inner beauty, (b) establishing independence, (c) understanding your identity, and (d) loving yourself.

The first to be discussed is the importance of inner beauty.

**The importance of inner beauty.** Participants strongly argue that the inner beauty of the heart and an intimate relationship with God is far more important than outer beauty and worldly treasure. Penny stated,

So, someone is going to mess up, you know, it's not like somebody, I almost like, I don't mean this bad to where it's like Pentecostal holiness or the people that you know, that wear the outside garb, not garb, but their clothing and their hair, but this that and the other. That doesn't mean a thing to me, I want to know what's in your heart. (Penny, 56)

Louise, when talking about her and her family, added,

You know we're not wealth, they're not wealthy, but yes, we are, we are blessed and God supplies all of our needs and sometimes our wants and our desires, sometimes. (Louise, 75)

I've never had a self-esteem in how I look. My self-esteem was down when I left my husband. My self-esteem is in God and God alone. (Blondie, 71)

Kay when speaking of worldly trends, stated,

If I liked it, I liked it, but if I didn't then I didn't wear it. Didn't follow the crowd no matter what you do, God is looking at your heart. (Kay, 71)

She then spoke about church discord over church seating,

We were going to a different church and it was announced that three families left that church. I knew people there, God is more interested in my heart than where I sit my backside on. (Kay, 71)

Your inner self, your inner beauty doesn't change, but when you get older your outer beauty goes so your inner beauty is the most important thing. (Nancy, 70)

Each participant strongly believed that true beauty and worth does not come from worldly treasures or outer beauty that fades, but rather the inner beauty of the heart.

Participants assert that the condition of the heart, or inner beauty, is more important to God and is therefore important to participants. Participants agree that focusing on their inner beauty helps form self-esteem and ultimately spiritual resilience. The next category to be discussed is establishing independence.



**Establishing independence.** This category speaks of the circumstances that each woman experienced either when she moved away or was forced to be independent and rely on the leadership of God. Penny stated,

Yeah, yeah, but actually what broke me, broke that, was I actually, that was in a period of time where I moved out of state. I was gone for about a year and a half. And uh, I was able to build other relationships with uh, Christian people there and different types just all kinds of people and just because I wasn't here with her all the time, now Steve worked Saturdays, so I had to have other relationships with people and Mama, wasn't there, so I learned how to be more independent and be independent from mom. (Penny, 56)

Kay, when mentioning her divorce from her husband and reliance on God, added,

Like I said I just begged him to put my family back together, but it didn't take any time to realize that that was the best thing that he had ever did for me was to take me out of that and not only my, my, kids and I, I became a better mother because I didn't have to, I wasn't busy taking care of him and trying to make him happy, it was they were my focus, um, I became a better mother, I found out myself again I, I totally, um, I found out that I had been mentally abused. Didn't know it until I was out of it. And then, um, you just kind of square your shoulders and say that's not gonna happen to me again. (Kay, 71)

Louise, when speaking of her Sunday school class, maintained,

You know it's like when you have a little baby when they're little they want to hold your hand and then when they get older they don't want to hold your hand, they want to be independent, but I think that when we're independent we need to learn how to trust God when we're little that's why I think that Sunday school is so important and I want, hopefully one of these days we can have a children's department you know a Sunday school class. (Louise, 75)

Blondie explaining her personality and independence as a single mom, and how God helped her to be more dependent on God and how to be a submissive wife, stated,

My personality was, my personality was already strong, I was the leader in my home, therefore God had to change me again. I was a strong woman, I'd raised, I'd raised my children by myself for five years in their teenage lives, and I was the do's and don'ts mom, uh, you know you do this and don't do this, it's when God was, he, he, had to retrain me on my husband too. (Blondie, 71)

Louise when speaking of her husband being away on a business trip, stated,

I was forced to be independent and live alone and depended just on God, while Bill was away. (Louise, 75)

All participants experienced areas where either they were forced to be independent and trust God, or became accustomed to being so independent that they had to rely on God to teach them how to be dependent on him. Participants argued that being in a situation where they had to trust God helped them be spiritually resilient. The next category to be discussed is understanding your identity.

**Understanding your identity.** This category places an importance on leaning on God for their identity and purpose. Penny stated,

Um, I'm way stronger than I was when I was younger through all of my life experiences, I don't um, take things so personal as I did when I was younger I um, I think I have wisdom that I can help people with. Um, because of life experiences, I think I can handle way more than I could ever handle before. Because growing up I was so skinny and stuff like I told you people made fun of me all the time, so I had very low self-esteem about myself, very low self-esteem and uh, I think maybe living through that and uh, realizing that, I'm me and you just love me or you don't love me and, uh and uh I don't have to um, I know there was a period of time where I thought that I had to have what everyone else had, I wasn't happy in what I had because, it wasn't as good enough as somebody else's but, by growing and getting older and trusting God more. I'm satisfied, I'm happy with where I am. (Penny, 56)

Since I got married when I was 20 and I was 34 at that point and all of that mental abuse had just taken care, I had, it had just taken, taken its toll and I had really lost who I was but I there was nowhere else to go I just had to lean, leaning on Jesus through every storm. (Kay, 71)

Reading the word and finding your identity in Christ makes you strong. (Blondie, 71)

Standing against the enemy when I knew who I was in Christ made me strong. (Louise, 75)

When speaking of God and heaven, Nancy added,

I'm his child and follower, my identity comes from him. Knowing who I am and that my name is written in the lamb's book of life. He's my key to getting into Heaven. (Nancy, 70)

Each participant was very adamant that trusting what God says about them in the Bible helps form their self-esteem and ultimately their spiritual resilience. The next category to discuss is loving yourself.

**Loving yourself.** This category encompasses participants' belief that loving one's self and practicing self-acceptance helps form spiritual resilience. Blondie stated,

Loving yourself is very important because when you have some confidence in yourself to believe in God and confidence in God to have confidence in yourself. When you listen, and believe what the word says, it gives you confidence and strength in yourself. (Blondie, 71)

Everybody has these thoughts so sometimes we beat ourselves up about stuff. People tell me they love me and they don't realize who I am or what I struggled with, you have to forgive yourself. (Kay, 71)

Yeah, you gotta love yourself, people who don't love themselves lead a miserable life. (Nancy, 70)

When I was young I felt like the ugly duckling. I was skinny and ugly but through God's grace and learning about what the word says that I am, it made me start loving myself. (Penny, 56)

Participants believe that aside from their belief and faith in God, they should love themselves and have confidence and practice self-acceptance despite their flaws and weaknesses.

## **Chapter V**

### **Summary and Discussion**

The notion of studying older adulthood and if elderly women can maintain a sense of resilience in their lives can be assumed to be counterintuitive (Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000). This can be because of the assumption among researchers that frailty, illness, and cognitive decline in old age has a negative correlation with resilience (Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000). However, research has debunked the ideology that negative life events are negatively correlated with resilience, but rather has been shown to increase spiritual resilience (Peteet & Balboni, 2013). Spiritual resilience is a multi-dimensional construct, but can be broadly defined as the placement of help being solely on God versus one's family members or one's self (MacKinlay, 2008). Furthermore, spirituality is shown to increase one's overall quality of life and health (McCauley et al., 2008; Peteet & Balboni, 2013). This hermeneutic phenomenological study allows older women's stories to be told and also allows a greater understanding of spirituality and the constructs of spiritual resilience.

Semi-structured interviews took place in the homes of five community-dwelling participants living in either the Sand Springs and Tulsa, Oklahoma. Furthermore, all attended the researcher's local church which is of the Pentecostal denomination. The variable spirituality was measured when discussing spiritual resilience. Participants discussed their relationship with God and the multi-dimensional aspects of spiritual resilience. According to participants' transcriptions, women defined spiritual resilience as only possible through their personal relationship with God. This definition can be further broken down into two subthemes (1) God as a Source and (2) God as a Provider.

These significant findings suggest that one's relationship with God is not just a determinant of spiritual resilience as past research argues (Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000), but rather is a cornerstone of spiritual resilience.

When discussing the determinants of spiritual resilience, two significant themes, seven significant subthemes and twenty-six categories were discovered. The two themes that encompass the researcher's data are (A) God is Sovereign and (B) Formational Determinants. The first theme, God is Sovereign, can be broken down into further subthemes (1) God Teaches Through Experiences, (2) God is There, (3) I Need God, and (4) God is in Control. These subthemes can then be further broken down into seven categories. The subtheme (1) God Teaches Through Experiences can be broken down into two categories, (a) Experiences and (b) Supernatural Experiences. Next the subtheme (2) God is There can be broken down into three categories, (a) Hope, (b) God talks to us, and (c) Assurance from God. The third subtheme I Need God can be broken into four categories (a) Sometimes Things are Just Too Hard to Bear, (b) Humility, (c) Understanding You're Human, and (d) Not Putting all Hope in Others. The final subtheme (4) God is in Control can be broken down into three categories, (a) God is in Control, (b) God Sees the Big Picture, and (c) Spiritual walk with God. This theme is meant to encompass women's life experiences and display what one's relationship with God looks like, and how it enriches spiritual resilience. These findings again are semi-consistent with past research because most studies discussed spirituality as a construct of spiritual resilience, but only a few truly viewed spirituality and one's relationship with

God as a key determinant of resilience (Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2015; Kinsel, 2005; Peteet & Balboni, 2013; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000; Wormer, Sudduth & Jackson III, 2011).

The second theme (B) Formational Determinants can be broken down into three subthemes, (1) Interpersonal Supports, (2) Practices or Behaviors, and (3) Intrapersonal Supports. These subthemes can be further broken down into twelve categories. The first subtheme, Interpersonal Supports can be broken down into (a) Professional Help, (b) Loving Others, (c) Family Supports, (d) Christian Friends, and (e) Church Family. The second theme Practices or Behaviors can be broken down into four categories, (a) Faithfulness, (b) Christian Music, (c) Prayer and (d) Reading the Bible. The final subtheme of Intrapersonal Supports can be broken down into four categories, (a) Importance of Inner Beauty, (b) Establishing Independence Makes You Stronger, (c) Understanding Your Identity Makes You Strong, and (d) Loving Yourself as an Attribute of Spiritual Resilience.

These findings encompass the multi-dimensionality of not only spiritual resilience, but the whole person, and because spiritual resilience is found in this research to be multi-dimensional, the researcher is confident of significant results. The results above being organized into different themes such as God, or spirituality, interpersonal supports, practices or behaviors and intrapersonal supports not only mirrors the multi-dimensionality of the women, but unveils that spirituality is much more than just one of the many variables of spiritual resilience. For instance, participants argued that spiritual resilience was only possible through a relationship with God. This classification is vital

because it provides a necessary foundational construct and an understanding of the importance of a relationship with God when further analyzing and discussing determinants of spiritual resilience (Langer, 2004). Furthermore, participants argued that one must obtain a relationship with God first, in order to successfully practice the other constructs listed in this study. This finding is different from researchers who have studied spiritual resilience. For instance, researchers have often classified a relationship with God to be merely one of many constructs of spiritual resilience (Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2015; Kinsel, 2005; Peteet & Balboni, 2013; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000; Wormer, Sudduth & Jackson III, 2011). When researchers classify one's spiritual relationship as merely a construct of spiritual resilience, and not a foundational determinant they can miss the heavy emphasis that participants place on God and the role God plays not only in participants' spiritual resilience, but also their subjective well-being and overall health. These findings signify that spiritual resilience can only be possible through one's spiritual relationship with God, but can be enhanced by various inner and external supports and practices or behaviors.

Because this research adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach in a qualitative study, it is difficult for results to be generalized to other participants. However, research regarding spiritual resilience strongly expresses similar determinants such as intrapersonal supports, interpersonal supports and any practices or behaviors that enhance spiritual resilience (Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2015; Kinsel, 2005; Peteet & Balboni, 2013; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000; Wormer, Sudduth & Jackson III, 2011). Even though some research describes one's relationship with God as one of many constructs of

spiritual resilience instead of a foundational concept, it is important to explore what previous researchers found and what they suggested future researchers would find.

Research strongly emphasizes the need for intrapersonal supports, though in research the term intrapersonal supports has been referred to as social connectedness, social supports, professional help, and importance of communal affect (Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2015; Kinsel, 2005; Manning, 2012; Ramsey & Blieszner, 2000; Wormer et al., 2011). Research emphasizes the need for various supports both inside and outside of a church setting, which mirrors the researcher's current findings of spiritual resilience. When discussing different practices or behaviors, research suggests that reading the Bible can be a good practice that would enhance spiritual resilience (Hamilton, Moore, Johnson & Koenig, 2013). This practice is consistent with the researcher's current findings, but in addition to Christian music, faithfulness and prayer as constructs of spiritual resilience. Finally, when discussing intrapersonal supports, research classifies this as the ability to have self-direction, hardiness, self-efficacy, integrity, resistance to oppression, acceptance of experiences, self-reflection, not caring what others think, self-understanding, and self-sufficiency (Gulbrandsen & Walsh, 2015; Haugan, Rannestad, Hammervold, Garasen & Espnes, 2011; Kinsel, 2005; Langer, 2004; Manning, 2012; McCauley, Tarpley, Haaz & Bartlett, 2008; Wormer, Sudduth & Jackson III, 2011). These findings in research closely mirror the researcher's findings, which can be generalized as the importance of self-love, knowing yourself, and establishing independence. This current research mirrors previous studies when discussing the formational constructs of spiritual resilience, but previous research does not equally



emphasize the importance of formational determinants and spiritual determinants of spiritual resilience. However, in this current research, the researcher adopts a holistic approach when discussing both spiritual determinants and formational determinants, but most importantly, denotes that participant's relationship with God is a foundational construct of resilience. Noting all of these dimensions of spiritual resilience is essential for conceptualizing spiritual resilience in older women.

### **Conclusions**

- 1 The factors of spiritual resilience can be divided into two different overall themes God is Sovereign and Formational Determinants. Participant's discussed their relationship with God as a foundational construct of resilience and then explored formational determinants that they practice for themselves, for others and for God to help form spiritual strength in their personal lives.
- 2 Participants were often impassioned, emotional, yet full of hope and faith when discussing their experiences with spiritual resilience. Furthermore, women often deemed spiritual resilience to be synonymous with their faith.
- 3 Participants mentioned many occurrences where they experienced devastation. In these experiences participants shared how they were quick to pray and read the Bible to maintain their spiritual resilience. However, there were times when participants' circumstances were too painful, so much that some participants noted being upset at God for some of their intense hardships. Some participants mentioned different times in their lives where they struggled maintaining spiritual resilience, but were encouraged by the thought that God had been there for them before and that he would be there for them again. This allowed them to grow stronger in themselves and grow to have a stronger relationship with God.

### **Limitations**

- 1 This empirical research yielded a small sample of participants. Because of this small sample size, this research cannot be generalizable to other older women, their experiences, effects of spirituality on resilience and relationship with God.

- 2 This study lacked cultural diversity among age, race, and religion among participants. This could have been helpful to understand the effect of spirituality across cultures.
- 3 The researcher chose participants that have attended the researcher's local church of the Pentecostal denomination. This could limit diversity in data due to the same doctrine being taught at the local church, which affects and influences participants' belief systems.

### **Recommendations**

- 1 Future research should include a larger sample of culturally diverse participants with a larger standard deviation between the ages of the participants.
- 2 A quantitative study should be utilized to study spiritual resilience to ensure generalizability.
- 3 A case study or longitudinal study is necessary in order to study the effects of spirituality over long periods of time, and to understand to what extent do experiences affect older women and their spiritual resilience.

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## **Vita**

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