

“DON'T YOU LET NOBODY TURN YOU AROUND”

Responsive Reading, *Perseverance* ¹

In December, 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton launched a daring expedition to cross the Antarctic on the ship, *Endurance*, perhaps the strongest wooden ship ever built.² With only 100 miles left in the journey, Shackleton made the fateful decision to stop and wait for a break in the heavy ice in the Weddell Sea. Unfortunately, the temperature continued to drop, and the ship became locked in the ice.

As the ice began to crush the vessel, Shackleton gave the order to abandon ship, and the crew began a march in search of safety, carrying minimal supplies and dragging three lifeboats. Eventually reaching open water, they boarded the lifeboats and finally landed on the deserted Elephant Island.

Stranded on the island with no hope of rescue, Shackleton and four other crew members set off in one of the lifeboats to reach the island of South Georgia. Traveling 800 miles through the world's most dangerous seas, they arrived at South Georgia only to discover that the whaling station was on the other side of the island.

In order to rescue his crew in time, Shackleton and two of his men had to cross the treacherous cliffs of the island on foot. The island's inhabitants considered such a journey impossible, but Shackleton and his two partners crossed the island in 36 hours, eventually saving their crew. Ernest Shackleton was a man of whom it might be said, “**Don't You Let Nobody Turn You Around**”!³

“Hiroo” Onoda was a Second Lieutenant in the Japanese Army in World War II. He was in the Philippines when the war ended, but somehow, he never got the word that the war was over. Onoda spent the next twenty-nine years hiding out in the Philippines and conducting one-man raids, believe that he was being faithful to his country's call. He refused to surrender for all those years until his former commanding officer traveled to the Philippines from Japan to formally relieve him of duty in 1974. “Hiroo” Onoda was a man of whom it might be said, “**Don't You Let Nobody Turn You Around**”!⁴

You have probably guessed that our African-American Spiritual for this third Sunday of Black History Month is “*Don't You Let Nobody Turn You Around*”:

Don't you let nobody turn you around,
Turn you around, turn you around;
Don't you let nobody turn you around;
Keep the straight and narrow way.

I say that I'm gonna hold out,
Hold out, hold out;
I say that I'm gonna hold out,
Until my change comes.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 16, 2020.

² *Endurance*, White Mountain Films, 2003, directed by George Butler.

³ <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/shackleton/ernest/s52s/chapter10.html> See also the account of Aslan's protection in C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*

<https://gavinortlund.com/2008/06/05/favorite-narnia-moments-2-shasta-meets-aslan/>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiroo_Onoda

I promised the Lord that I would hold out,
 Hold out, hold out;
 I promised the Lord that I would hold out;
 I'm gonna wait until my change comes.

The specific focus of our thoughts this morning is the idea of “perseverance”; of “keeping on keeping on” until we have reached the Goal. We considered four short passages of Scripture in our Responsive Reading, and I’m going to look briefly at each of them as we pursue the Goal for this morning’s message. You might want to have that out as we proceed. We’ll take them in the same order as on your handout.

I don’t usually talk about the Greek or Hebrew underlying our Scripture readings, but I do want to focus on a couple of Greek words this morning. You’ll notice that our authors frequently associate the ideas of “suffering” or “testing” with “endurance” or “perseverance.” Our main word this morning has to do with “perseverance,” and that word is ὑπομονή (*hupomoné*; “hoopamonay”).

In our first text, Paul tells us that ὑπομονή (perseverance) leads to “character,” and character leads to “hope.” The word Paul used for “character” is δοκιμὴν (*dokimén*), which is a word that can also refer to sterling silver—silver that has been so purified that the metalsmith’s reflection can be seen in it.

We’ve noted many times that God’s goals for us in this life are that we allow God to so shape our character that we’re willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with God, and that we bring as many others with us as we can. Another way to put this would be to speak of the goal of our character formation as a purification that results in God’s reflection being seen in us as in silver. And the central idea in “hope” (ἐλπίς; *elpis*) is that we trust God to keep the Promises made to us in Scripture (Hebrews 11:1).

In our second text, James, our Lord’s half-brother, wrote that “*the testing of your faith produces perseverance.*” It’s interesting that the word James used for “testing” comes from the same root as the word Paul used for character (*dokimion*); and he used the same word Paul used for “perseverance”—*hupomoné*.

A key point here is that “perseverance” is not an attitude that lies down passively and allows floods of trouble to rush over it. “Perseverance”—*hupomoné*—is the spirit that meets challenges head on and overcomes them. James points out that the point of perseverance through testing is “*so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*”

The author of Hebrews addresses this idea of perseverance using the image of a foot race, an image that appears a number of times in the New Testament.⁵ Perseverance and running are forever locked together in my mind. I’ve told you before about two friends in our high school band with whom I would run around the track after school. We were not athletes, and we encouraged ourselves to keep on keeping on with a three-part chant: “Per-se-ver-ance is the better part of va-lor.”

The image in Hebrews is of runners at the end of a marathon as they enter the stadium for the final lap of the race. There are two dimensions to this image. The first image is of the persons in the stands, each of whom has run this race in the past, watching and cheering those who are now running their own marathon. The other side of the image is that the runners look to the champions in the stands for inspiration.⁶

⁵ See Acts 20:24; 1 Corinthians 9:24; Galatians 5:7; 2 Timothy 4:7.

⁶ I haven’t been able to find the story online, but I remember a story about Mary Lou Retton, the

Hebrews uses the image of our Lord Jesus as One who stands at the end of the track, cheering us on. Scripture also teaches us that He is, at one and the same time, our Companion on the track. And there's a particular image in this text from Hebrews that fits especially in Black History Month. Hebrews 12:3 speaks of Jesus having "scorned the shame of the Cross" for the sake of achieving our redemption.

One commentator applied Jesus' "scorning of shame" to our own journeys with the phrase, "**despising [or not being discouraged by] the fact that we are despised.**" While this concept sadly continues to apply in our own day, it certainly applied to Dr. King . . . and to some of you . . . during the years when the battle for Civil Rights was at its peak. I'll come back to that.

Our final Scripture this morning is from 2 Peter. That text has much in common with the idea of a race, and uses the now-familiar *hupomoné* for "perseverance." The chain of virtues we find in this text begins with "faith" and ends with "love," which is an essential beginning and a Final Goal worthy of all we have to give.

That's why Peter told us to "*make every effort*"—as in the perseverance of running a marathon—to let God build these character qualities into our lives, "*for if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 1:8). The word being translated "unproductive" actually means "without fruit," and that's important.

Remember that our lives on earth have two purposes: (1) to develop the Character of Jesus in us; and (2) to bring as many others with us as we can. The Character of Jesus is similar to the "fruit of the Spirit"—"*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23); and bringing others with us is a harvest of a different sort of "fruit" (Luke 10:2).

As Quaker author, Richard Foster, put it, "By undertaking the Disciplines of the spiritual life that we *can* do, [such as knowledge, self-control, and perseverance], we receive from God the ability to do things that under our own steam we simply *cannot* do, **such as loving our enemies.**"⁷ That's the door through which those who hate or despise us get into God's Kingdom.

Remember that as you and I follow Jesus, we have a Goal, and that Goal is nothing less than to reflect the very likeness of Christ. The Christian Life is going somewhere, and at each day's end we do well to ask ourselves, "**Am I any farther on?**"

The challenge each of us faces has to do with "*the race marked out for us*" (Hebrews 11:2), not the race marked out for someone else. And the question at the end of the Journey will have to do with our faithfulness in running THAT race. One of my favorite stories of all time is this one Roy Angell told about a track meet in Alabama:

There was a large crowd at this meet, because it was expected that the state record for the mile would be broken that day. As the runners lined up on the blocks for the race, it was abundantly clear who the favored runner was. He was tall, strong, and confident. In strange contrast, one of the other runners looked very, very out of place. This young man was not unusually tall. He was downright skinny. His legs seemed no more than spindles.

champion Olympic gymnast, sending a note of encouragement to a gymnast who had just won a silver medal. The message was something like this: "I love seeing the silver on you; and I will see gold on you in four more years." And she did.

⁷ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p. 88.

While folks were trying to take this all in, the gun was sounded and the race was on. To the crowd's delight, the favored runner did set a new record for the mile in Alabama. Then, as the officials were setting up the track for the next event, the fans became aware that this spindly runner was still on the track.

The crowd watched in stunned amazement as the young man stumbled the last fifty yards and literally fell across the finish line. One of the officials wiped blood from the boy's face and asked, "Son, what in the world are you doing in this race, anyway?" As he struggled for air, the boy said, "My school had a good miler, but he got sick at the last minute and couldn't run. My coach had promised to have somebody in every event, and he asked me if I'd run the mile."

"Yes," the official said, "but the race was over. Why didn't you quit running?" The boy replied, "Mister, **they didn't send me here to quit. They didn't send me here to win. They sent me here to run the mile, and I ran the mile.**"

Hupomoné—perseverance—is not some romantic notion that lends us wings to fly over the difficulties and the hard places in life. *Hupomoné* is a determination that goes steadily on and refuses to be deflected. Obstacles do not daunt *hupomoné* and discouragements do not take its Hope away. *Hupomoné* is the steadfast endurance that carries on until, in the end, it reaches the Goal. My friend, follow Jesus with all that is in you, and **Don't you let nobody turn you around.**

On a long-ago CHRISTmas Eve, Dr. King talked memorably about perseverance. He's talking here about "despising being despised." He's talking about the result of God's transforming work in our hearts so that we really *can* have God's love for our enemies:

I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and I've seen hate on the faces of too many sheriffs, too many white citizens' councilors, and too many Klansmen of the South to want to hate, myself; and every time I see it, I say to myself, "Hate is too great a burden to bear."

Somehow we must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents and say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. **Do to us what you will and we will still love you.**"

We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by [an] unjust system, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good, and so throw us in jail and *we will still love you*. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, *we will still love you*.

Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and *we will still love you*. Send your propaganda agents around the country, and make it appear that we are not fit, culturally and otherwise, for integration, and *we'll still love you*.

But be assured that we'll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and *one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that **we will win you in the process**, and our victory will be a double victory.*

**Don't let nobody turn you around, my friends.
Don't you let nobody turn you around.**

Three days before his martyrdom, Dr. King said these words at a church in Memphis:

We shall overcome. We shall overcome. Deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome. And I believe it because **somehow the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.** . . .

With this faith, **we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.** With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to speed up the Day.

And in the words of prophecy, *Every valley shall be exalted. And every mountain and hill shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain and the crooked places straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.* This will be a Great Day. This will be a marvelous hour. And at that moment—figuratively speaking in biblical words—the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.⁸

**Don't let nobody turn you around, my friends.
Don't you let nobody turn you around.**

Amen, and Amen.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_Shall_Overcome

WE SHALL OVERCOME.

We shall overcome, we shall overcome
We shall overcome some day.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall overcome some day.

The Lord will see us through, the Lord will see us through
The lord will see us through some day.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
The Lord will see us some day.

We're on to victory, we're on to victory
We're on to victory some day.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
We're on to victory some day.

We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand
We'll walk hand in hand some day.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
We'll walk hand in hand some day.

We are not afraid, we are not afraid
We are not afraid today.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
We are not afraid today.

The truth shall make us free, the truth shall make us free
The truth shall make us free some day.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
The truth shall make us free some day.

We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace
We shall live in peace some day.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall live in peace some day.⁹

⁹ https://www.negrospirituals.com/songs/we_shall_overcome.htm

Perseverance

Leader: *Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope (Romans 5:1-4).*

People: ***Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4).***

Leader: *Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-3).*

People: ***His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Peter 1:3-4).***

Leader: *For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love (2 Peter 1:5-7).*

People: ***For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:8).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

People: **Thanks be to God!**

