



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Enduring Perseverance: A Word Study

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I first recall hearing Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If," in [John Facenda's narration](#) of film clips chronicling the rigors of NFL football in the 1960s and 70s. As I grew older, I developed an appreciation for Kipling's poem in its own right, especially for these lines:

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you
 Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!" (Kipling 1943).

It is apparent that Kipling understood that life can at times deliver staggering blows that challenge our resolve to hold on. If we are attentive and honest, we soon learn that the notion that life will always be easy is naive. If we are equally attentive to Scripture, and reading it broadly, we learn that God's word doesn't shy away from this reality. The general tone of Scripture is candid about the impact of trials and exhorts us to endure them with perseverance. Anyone who conveys the notion that following God always results in pleasing outcomes is misrepresenting his revealed text.

Enduring Perseverance — Meaning

The Greek words we are considering in this study are the noun, ὑπομονή (*hypomonē*; 32), and verb, ὑπομένω (*hypomenō*; 17), which occur a total of 49 times in the NT. Danker gives two meanings of *hypomonē*: (1) "capacity for resolute continuance in a course of action', *endurance*,

perseverance, steadfastness; (2) ‘persistence in awaiting realization of’ someth., *expectation*” (Danker 2009, 366). He notes that the verb, *hypomenō*, is a compound word (ὑπό, μένω [remain under]), and gives three meanings: (1) “‘stay in a place when others are leaving’, *remain, stay (be-hind)*”; (2) ‘be steadfast in face of difficulty’, *endure*; (3) ‘be persistent in expecting someth.’, *wait for*, unless one understands the focus to be on a condition demanding endurance (s. 2)” (Danker 2009, 365).

Greek and Jewish Backgrounds

The verb *hypomenō* is found as early as the time of Homer (DNTT 1976, 772), but Plato and Aristotle established the conception of *hypomonē* that would hold for the entire Greek tradition (Spicq 1994, 414). Though initially “ethically neutral,” from Plato onward, both words implied value judgments.

Positively, steadfastness, constancy and perseverance are among the noblest of manly virtues, equally esteemed in the ethical systems of Plato and Aristotle. A proud Greek freeman endures burdens, difficulties or dangers, without any thought of tangible or moral reward but solely for the sake of his honour. But negatively, there is the dishonourable attitude of mere passive resignation, in the face of degradation, abuse, slavery or tyranny, whether from fear, weakness, or indolence (DNTT 1976, 772).

For the Greeks, to practice *hypomenō* was “to face difficulties without expecting help or putting one’s confidence in others; one endures alone, as Aristotle notes. He makes *hypomonē* a virtue, because it is a noble thing to keep to the mean in difficult circumstances” (Spicq 1994, 415). The phrase, “stiff upper lip” comes to mind, and it is no surprise that the Stoics embraced the idea (cf. Spicq 1994, 415).

When examining the LXX’s use of the word, “one enters a different semantic world altogether” (Spicq 1994, 418). While Job and some later Jewish writers use it in its Greek sense of being steadfast, holding one’s ground, and persevering in distress (Job 6.10; Sir 22.18) (DNTT 1976, 773), occurrences of “the substantive *hypomonē* translate the Hebrew verb *qawâh* [קָוָה] (in the piel) or one of its derivatives *tiqwâh* [תִּקְוָה], *miqwêh* [מִקְוֶה], Hebrew terms that signify expectant waiting, intense desire” (Spicq 1994, 418). God was typically the object of this expectant hope, its presence being evidence of the personal covenant relationship in which Israel was called to wait upon the Lord, who was accordingly seen as “the Hope of Israel” (DNTT 1976, 772). So, for example, in Psalm 39.7, David writes, “And now, O Lord, for what do I wait [LXX *hypomonē*; Hebrew *qawâh*]? My hope is in you” (cf. Ps 71.5; Jer 14.8; 17.13).

In the New Testament

In the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, *hypomonē* and *hypomenō* are sometimes used in the sense of remaining or staying behind, or to refer to “steadfastness and perseverance ‘under’ certain circumstances” (Radl 1993, 405). In Luke 2.43, “the boy Jesus *stayed behind* in Jerusalem.” In Acts 17.14, the brothers in Berea sent Paul away to Athens, but “Silas and Timothy *remained* there.” In Luke’s account of the parable of the soils, Jesus says that “the seed that landed on good soil” represents those “who, after hearing the word, cling to it with an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with *steadfast endurance*” (Luke 8.15 NET). Jesus uses the words in multiple contexts

where he is emphasizing the disciples' need to persevere in the face of tribulations or persecutions. In Matthew 10.22, he says his disciples "will be hated by all for [his] name's sake. But the one who *endures* to the end will be saved." We read similar statements in the accounts of the Olivet discourse (Matt 24.13; Mark 13.13; Luke 21.19).

The idea of expectant hope implied in the Synoptic persecution texts is specifically developed by the writers of the epistles and Revelation. Paul sees *hypomonē* as a quality that is required of believers who want to have lives that are pleasing to God, as, for example, in Romans 2.7, where he says God will give eternal life to those "who by *perseverance* [*hypomonē*] in good works seek glory and honor and immortality" (NET; ESV—"patience"; NIV—"persistence"). Writing of the expectant hope believers are to maintain in the face of the sufferings of the present age, he says that hope will have a positive outcome for believers if we "eagerly wait for it with *endurance* [*hypomonē*]" (Rom 8.25 NET; ESV/NIV—"patience/patiently"). He expresses a similar idea in terms of the comfort and salvation that are granted to the afflicted (2 Cor 1.6). In view of these expressions of hope, we are not surprised to see Paul commending endurance to the churches and associating it with God or Christ (cf. 1 Thess 1.3; 2 Thess 1.4; 3.5; Col 1.11; 1 Tim 6.11; Tit 2.2; 2 Tim 3.10). Elsewhere, the Hebrews writer exhorts his readers to respond to difficult and even oppressive circumstances by demonstrating endurance (cf. Heb 10.32, 36; 12.1–3, 7). Peter similarly appeals to his readers in his charge to follow Jesus' example of suffering (1 Pet 2.20). In Revelation, John both models endurance and exhorts the Asian churches under duress to persist in it (Rev 1.9; 2.2, 19; 3.10; 13.10; 14.12).

James, one of the earliest NT writers, uses the words to encourage maturity and hope. His examples demonstrate the wisdom of translating the words with a phrase like our title's "enduring perseverance." In James 1.2–3, he emphasizes the positive role of *hypomenō* in producing Christian character, a benefit that leads to a positive perspective on trials: "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" (NIV). Paul (Rom 5.3–5) and Peter (2 Pet 1.6) also use the word to emphasize character development.

In the other two texts where he uses the words, James stresses the waiting-in-hope theme seen in the other letters. In the context of the oppression his readers were experiencing at the hands of unscrupulous landowners, James appeals to them to have patience (*μακροθυμία*, *makrothymia*), but caps off his exhortation with an appeal to imitate the paradigmatic perseverance of Job: "As you know, we count as blessed those who have *persevered* [*hypomenō*]. You have heard of Job's *perseverance* [*hypomenō*] and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (Jas 5.11 NIV). The text serves as a fitting bookend to his general statement at the letter's beginning: "Blessed is the one who *perseveres* [*hypomenō*] under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (1.12 NIV).

Conclusion

Given that they occur just 49 times, the significance of *hypomonē* and *hypomenō* in the NT is striking. One of life's realities is that everyone has experienced, is experiencing, or will experience trials and suffering. Jesus and his delegated messengers are candid that this reality will often be exacerbated by the fact that we are following him. To adapt Kipling's words, we can count on having times when we will be hard pressed to "hold on," and will be able to do so only because of the hope we derive from our Lord who says to us, "Hold on!"

We will be wise, therefore, to make the texts that stress enduring perseverance a regular part of our meditations.

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An Additional Thought

"Jesus did three things to solve the problem of suffering. First, he came. He suffered with us. He wept. Second, in becoming man he transformed the meaning of our suffering: it is now part of his work of redemption. Our death pangs become birth pangs for heaven, not only for ourselves but also for those we love. Third, he died and rose. Dying, he paid the price for sin and opened heaven to us; rising, he transformed death from a hole into a door, from an end into a beginning."

~ Peter Kreeft. 1986. *Making Sense Out of Suffering*. Servant Books, 138

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