

Victim or Victor?

My favorite all-time baseball player is Hank Aaron. In 1954 Aaron broke into major league baseball at the age of 20. He was from Mobile, Alabama, and was continually subjected to racial discrimination. He grew up poor in the Jim Crow South. But he could play baseball. Aaron was able to block it out of his mind and become one of baseball's greatest players. He played major league baseball for 23 years and still holds the record for Runs Batted In, extra base hits and total bases. He will be most remembered for surpassing the iconic Babe Ruth record for career home runs. During Aaron's pursuit of the home run record he endured much hatred because he was a black man on the verge of capturing the most coveted record of all – the all-time home run mark. The beloved Ruth had 714 home runs. As Aaron inched his way closer to passing Ruth, the hate mail and death threats intensified.



“Dear Hank Aaron. Retire or die ... You'll be in Shea Stadium July 6-8 and in Philly July 9th to 11th ... You will die in one of those games. I'll shoot you in one of them.” And another piece of hate mail said: Dear Hank Aaron. How about some sickle cell anemia, Hank?” Our nation and the sport of baseball was not ready for people of color surpassing records currently held by white players, especially the legendary Home Run King, Babe Ruth. Many of the letters began with the “N-word” and went downhill from there. He was known for reading and answering all his fan mail. (I can personally attest to that as I have an original response to a letter from me.) Early in his major league career white players stayed in hotels when on the road. The three black players on the team had to stay in private homes. As one sports writer put it, "Aaron led the league in everything but hotel accommodations."

Aaron had a choice: he could play the role of a victim, or he could focus on his unbelievable abilities and become a victor. He chose to be the victor, keeping his focus and leading the Braves to major league baseball championships. Aaron left the home run record in the dust, finishing with 755 home runs, a mark that stood for 33 years. Along the way he won Gold Glove awards, MVP awards and a record number of all-star team selections. What is indicative of handling the stress with class was his consistency over his entire career. He never let it detract from his play or his character off the field. He was a role model of class and courage. Hank Aaron was truly a victor in every sense of the word.

During our lifetime we will be called all kinds of names, and at times, will be treated unfairly. We will have just cause to be angry about the treatment from others. We can play the role of the victim, sinking into times of self-pity and depression. Or, we can overcome the obstacles and not let them stop us from achieving our goals. The choice is up to us.

Hank Aaron had a similar choice. The hatred had nothing to do with his character; it was only because of the color of his skin. Aaron was a man of faith, and relied on God for strength. He said, “I need to depend on Someone who is bigger, stronger and wiser than I am. I don't do it on my own. God is my strength. He gave me a good body and some talent and the freedom to develop it. He helps me when things go wrong. He forgives me when I fall on my face. He lights the way.” Aaron's role model was Jackie Robinson. As the first black player in major league baseball, how did Robinson keep control when berated by fans and players? Aaron said, “I learned later that Jackie Robinson prayed a lot for help. And he also had a sense of destiny about what he was doing, so much so that he felt God's presence with him. He learned to put aside his pride and quick temper for the bigger thing he was doing.”

God is with you and me, too. When times are tough and you are under stress, put it in God's hands. When you feel you are being unfairly treated know that God will give you much more than you deserve. Being at the Lord's side you can handle what comes your way with courage and class. And the result of taking God's path is your destiny as the eventual victor. Avoid the victim mentality. Nothing good comes out of considering yourself as the victim. Instead, know that God loves you. Let Him be the strength that will lead you to victory.

Scripture: *In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37). Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57).*

Question: How do you handle unfair criticism and negative thoughts when you are trying to do the right thing?

Prayer: Heavenly Father. We live in a world that tries to put other people down as a way of trying to gain an upper hand. With your help, give us the strength to overcome the obstacles and succeed in the tasks ahead of us. Amen.