HANG IN THERE

Hello everyone, I’m Bill Campbell, and I have the privilege of serving as an elder here at Oakwood. It is my joy and honor today to be able to present God’s Word in what I hope is a memorable and applicable way. But, before I get started, I know several of you were concerned last year about Mela, **(slide 2)** and I wanted to show you that at least three of her offspring seem to have claimed my front yard as their ancestral nesting ground, so it appears all is well. We pick up this week with James 5:7-12, but since this was intended to be a letter read in one setting, **(slide 3)** I want to do a quick recap of Austin’s message from last week. Last week we heard about how placing money, power, ambition, or anything ahead of obedience to God leads to destruction and despair, but obedience to God leads to satisfaction that the world cannot provide and hope in the eternity to come. Not that being rich is a bad thing, but it is your attitude towards the things of this world that matters.

So, onto today’s passage. Quick question—how many of you enjoy travel? I love learning about different cultures, different languages, different ways of viewing things. One of my friends spent a few years in Belgium and went to a French-language church while she was there. She said she learned some things by hearing the French, which may translate to different words in English, and in that roundabout way, she learned better what the writer’s original intent was in Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic. So, in preparation for this, I read this passage in Spanish prior to speaking today, and in one of my favorite translations, the HPV—the Hawaiian Pidgin Version.

This is a language spoken by a few hundred thousand people, mainly in Hawaii, and I’d like to share this version with you. Now, I can’t do it justice—the cadence, the accents—it’s impossible for me. However, it is similar in cadence and pronunciation to other creole languages, such as those spoken in Jamaica, the Bahamas, Trinidad, and other English-speaking Caribbean nations. So, I’ve invited Hazel Gumbs to read this for us. Hazel is originally from Trinidad, spent decades as a teacher, some of it helping immigrant children from Caribbean nations learn to speak American English, so she’s somewhat of an expert on this. I’ve got the HPV and ESV side by side on the screen for everyone to follow along. If you’re able, please stand for the reading of God’s Word. (Hazel reads HPV, **follow along with slides 4-8)**

The thing that really jumped out to me about this version is that every time in the ESV we see, “be patient”, it is translated in the HPV as “hang in dea”. Believe it or not, when I looked at the Greek, this is a more accurate translation. The original Greek word is “makrothymesate”, which means to endure, or to be long-suffering. These verses are a reminder to us to simply hang in there. **(slide 9)**

That’s a phrase that sounds great. But, unfortunately, I can’t remember a time in my life when I’ve been told to “hang in there” when that advice has been particularly helpful. It’s often the sort of platitude that goes in one ear and out the other. It’s like assessing a situation, shrugging your shoulders and saying, “it is what it is.” Of course it is what it is! What else would it be? Or, “can I be honest with you?” No, I’d much prefer you lie. Have you been lying to me for the rest of our conversation? Or maybe, someone starts a statement with “no offense”, or “don’t take this the wrong way,” which pretty much guarantees that whatever is said next, I will definitely take the wrong way and be offended.

Yet, here is God, telling us very clearly, “hang in there”. Fortunately, he spends the next few verses telling us exactly what He means by that, showing us how to do it, and sharing with us the benefits of patient endurance. This boils down to four points **(slide 10):** One, begin with the end in mind. Two, process your conflict appropriately. Three, draw encouragement from faith heroes. And four, maintain your integrity.

In verse 7, we are told to hang in there until the coming of the Lord. James then gives us the example of a farmer planting his seeds in the spring, tending the land through both the early and late rains in order for the “precious fruit of the earth” to be given by the crops. 1st century Israelites were a mainly agrarian society, with farmer being the number one occupation. This analogy would have related to almost everyone back then. However, it doesn’t relate to me. I had to do a little research on 1st century farming. **(slide 11)**

As it turns out, similar to rice paddies in southeast Asia, often times farms in ancient Israel were built on terraced cliffsides. Why? First, because rivers in the area were ill-suited for irrigation. The only available irrigation sources in Israel are the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee, both of which are so close to sea level that their water cannot be easily diverted. Second, much of the rest of the land is desert with scant rainfall. Ancient farmers worked around this by cultivating terraces on mountainsides and crafting them in such a way that they held the limited rainfall they received. According to “Mevasseret Yerushalayim: The Ancient Settlement and its Agricultural Terraces”, an article published in The Biblical Archaeologist in 1981, “Setting up and maintaining terraces was easier said than done. After farmers manually cleared the rocks, they hauled over a layer of fertile soil and then lugged back the cleared rocks to create retaining walls, which kept the terraces from collapsing during the rainy season. Only then would they get to planting.” **(slide 12)** This backbreaking work required careful planning, an understanding of local conditions, patience, and above all else, faith that the Lord would provide.

Now that we understand some of the context of farming in Israel in the 1st century, we can more clearly see why farmers would be a great example of patiently waiting, just as we are to wait for the coming of the Lord. When we talk about beginning with the end in mind, this is the ultimate end to keep in mind. Jesus is returning. Hallelujah! But, brothers and sisters, how would our decision-making, our mindset, our perceptions of reality, our words, our deeds, and our relationships change if we kept the fact that Jesus is returning in the front of our minds? Would we allow our lives to be consumed by what’s coming out on Netflix, how the Bucs draft went, or whether Drake or Kendrick Lamar came out the winner in their battle of diss tracks? (It was clearly Kendrick.) **(slide 13)** No, we would be spending our idle time carefully planning how we would be building God’s Kingdom, learning local conditions by discovering where God is working through our network of believers—a.k.a. your local church—showing patience in allowing God to work through us and finishing the course and ministry that we have received from the Lord Jesus (as Paul says in Acts 20:24), and living in the faith that the Lord will water the seeds we plant, understanding we are responsible for the process, not the results. Like “da farma guys”, this work is emotionally backbreaking, but also the most rewarding thing we can do in our lives.

But, of course, one of the biggest obstacles to success, it seems, is other people. And let’s be clear-- verse 9 is directed specifically at other believers—do not grumble against one another, brothers and sisters. I can tell you that I am rarely offended by anything someone of the world says against me, because I approach it from the perspective that they just don’t know the Truth. But another believer, someone who I trust at a deeper level than I ever would someone of the world, a fellow representative of Christ—when they offend me, it just hits different. A snide remark, a mistimed joke, or a miscommunication of intent can cause turmoil in the hearts of your co-workers in Christ. If unresolved, this can lead to long-term acrimony, or grumbling against one another. **(slide 14)** The King James translates the phrase “Do not grumble against one another” as “grudge not against one another.” The Biblia Reina Valera translates this as “no os quejeis unos contra otros”, which directly translates to English as “do not complain one against the other.” Put those together and grumbling means to hold a grudge so tightly that it results in an inability to not complain about something or someone.

Note that in none of these translations does it say, “do not offend one another”. We are humans, and we make mistakes. We choose words poorly. We misinterpret intent. Words mean different things to different people. And sometimes, offense is necessary for your growth as a Christian. Sometimes, someone will say something they KNOW is going to offend you, because you are in the wrong and are holding on to something or some attitude you should not be. **(slide 15)** That is called “speaking the truth in love”, and that is clearly not what this passage is about. No, this passage is about what to do when you have searched your heart, studied God’s Word, and truly believe yourself to be in the right, but you are still offended by another believer.

So, and men are particularly good at this, although this is not strictly a masculine activity, the manly thing to do is to just take our feelings about these people who have offended us, or stood in the way of our work, and just tuck it into that wastebasket in our soul that processes offenses and shred it there. And that works for a while. Right up until it doesn’t. See, that offense shredder that we have inside us has a tendency to jam on particularly painful or important offenses, or due to repeated small offenses, something I refer to as “death by a thousand papercuts”. Then, offenses build up, unable to be dealt with, until the shredder bin starts overflowing. Then those un-dealt with feelings start to cause the waste basket to overflow, and get into places they shouldn’t be, and then all of a sudden something comes out of your mouth about someone we should be loving and kind towards that is altogether unloving and unkind.

**(slide 16)** Folks, that is what bitterness does. Bitterness often forms from unresolved conflict. Bitterness is defined by psychologist Seth Meyers in Psychology Today as “feelings of sadness, resentment, and anger—especially anger—that accumulate over time. It can result from insult or injury.”. He further explains that “becoming emotionally bitter is much like the progression of a child’s physical growth. Parents don’t notice how much their child gains in height each day, but there comes a time when they suddenly see how much their son or daughter has changed. Becoming emotionally bitter happens similarly but follows an escalating path until it becomes noticeable.” **(slide 17)** As the proud parent of a daughter who was a toddler last week and today is 5’3”, I understand this. To know if you are harboring feelings of bitterness, Meyers suggests three things: **(slide 18)** first, consider how frequently you get bothered or irritated by little things. Second, consider how often you feel misunderstood or unappreciated. Third, consider whether or not you believe you will ever truly feel happy. If you are constantly feeling irritated, unappreciated, or hopeless, you may be unknowingly harboring bitterness, and it may be time to clean out the shredder.

Paul explains how to move on from bitterness in Ephesians 4:1-3. “I… urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” **(slide 19)** The solution to bitterness lies in changing your attitude toward others. Understand that, in general, a believer never intentionally set out to offend you. It is highly unlikely that a member of this congregation got up this morning and thought to themselves, “I’m going to go make enemies today.” And even if they did, that is their story, not yours. Paul asks YOU to walk in a manner worthy of your calling, not for you to ensure OTHERS do that. It is YOUR responsibility to choose humility and gentleness, to choose patience and to choose to bear with one another. Why? Because through your better attitudes and actions the whole of Christendom is blessed! As an elder, I have had plenty of opportunity to be offended. But I see the way that the others on the board always prioritize unity of the body of believers over personal feelings, and it emboldens me to do the same. My co-laborers in Christ help me clean out my shredder.

But what if that’s not enough? What if you find yourself unable to let go? We have a resolution for that as well. In Matthew 18, Jesus gives us a template for conflict resolution. **(slide 20)** If a brother or sister offends you, first go to them, with an attitude of resolution, not rightness. Chances are they don’t even know they have offended you, and this can be resolved person to person. If no resolution can be achieved, go again with an intermediary—the Bible says two or three—to help resolve the conflict. Again, this is not about who is right or wrong, but about restoring the relationship. Finally, after those two steps have been attempted, the Elders are happy to be that third layer of resolution. But regardless of the level of intervention required, the imperative is that if you are the offended party, it is up to you to initiate the conflict resolution, not wait for the other person to realize they have caused a problem. They won’t. With that in mind, bitterness is something we choose for ourselves, and also something that we can choose to do something about. Releasing that bitterness is a key component of “hanging in there”.

I mentioned a moment ago about looking towards my co-laborers in Christ to help me navigate these feelings. James expands on that. In verses 10-11, he reminds us that we have an entire Bible full of examples of hanging in there. “We consider those who have remained steadfast.” **(slide 22)** We must do this because planning ahead, working diligently, remembering Christ’s ultimate victory, and not grumbling against one another give us strength to live day to day, but do not immunize us against wearing down over time. When it comes to the Christian life, we are running a marathon, not a sprint. **(slide 23)** We can train our best before the event, just like we begin with the end in mind like da farma guys, and that preparation helps us hang in there longer and stronger before we reach stress levels. We can choose to purge ourselves of toxins before the race, just like we purge ourselves of conflict and bitterness, and that will help us hang in there when we step on the figurative pebbles or get bumped by a fellow runner. But—and I’m no expert on this, but this is what I hear anyway—there comes a point in every marathon that a runner hits what they call “the wall”. **(slide 24)** This is the point in the race, usually between 18-22 miles of the 26 mile race, that the runner has exhausted their supply of glycogen, needed to fuel the muscles. It was described by one runner as your legs feeling like jelly while simultaneously weighing 8 tons each. The closest I’ve ever personally felt to this was when I was asked to substitute for a hockey team that would have had to forfeit in the game after mine, after my team was already shorthanded, and I stupidly said yes, leading to me logging 72 minutes of ice time that night. After the game, both my hamstrings and quads cramped at the same time, leaving me unable to do anything except lay on the locker room floor, hydrate, wait it out and try not to cry.

But, what kept me going during that second game was the encouragement of my teammates, their appreciation for what I was doing, and the fact that I was so tired they at least knew that someone was back on defense in the third period since I was too exhausted to skate up for offense. Similarly like in a big marathon, many people hit that wall, attempt to hydrate, get some glucose into their system, and see the other runners around them similarly struggling but continuing to press onward, and that provides inspiration.

James chooses to highlight the example of Job **(slide 25)** in verse 11 as his example of someone hanging in there. Job, of course, was allowed to be tormented by Satan directly in an attempt to make Job give up his faith. His children all died in a horrific accident, his possessions were all lost to raiders or fire, he was covered head to toe in painful sores, and the only person in Job’s life that Satan spared was his wife, who very encouragingly told Job to “curse God and die.” Yet Job hung in there. His unwavering commitment to God through these trials was so exemplary that he became a saying: “the steadfastness of Job”.

**(slide 26)** But James could have mentioned any one of a number of examples from the Old Testament to encourage us. He could have chosen Noah, who continued to build and wait patiently for the rain to come, enduring ridicule and shame for 150 years before God’s plan came to fruition. He could have chosen Daniel, who refused to compromise his faith through a lifetime of living in pagan Babylon. Or perhaps Ruth, in her unwavering commitment to her mother-in-law Naomi. Maybe David in his trust that God would deliver his anointed king from the unrelenting pursuit of King Saul, when he boldly stated that “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.”

Perhaps if James had written this letter a couple decades later, he could have called upon the examples of Paul, who persevered through arrests, imprisonment, multiple attempts to stone him, a shipwreck, a venomous snake bite, and being chained to a Roman soldier under house arrest for years while awaiting his appeal to Caesar. He could have chosen the example of Stephen, who in the face of certain death, continued to preach his first sermon. (As an aside, thank you all for allowing me to live after I gave my first sermon last year.) Or, he could have chosen the example of Jesus himself, who endured every hardship known to mankind, suffering physical pain, shame, rejection, and finally a torturous death on the cross in order to fulfill his purpose for our redemption. All of these people hung in there for God’s glory and ultimately, our benefit as well.

In all of these examples, we see, as James does, that the Lord has purpose, and He is compassionate and merciful. Job’s possessions were restored, he had many more children, and his health recovered. Noah was proven right and he and his family were spared from the flood. Daniel was given a vision of God, lived a long, full life as a chief advisor to the Babylonian throne, and lived to see the beginning of the return to Israel from captivity. Ruth eventually married Boaz and was a part of the lineage that would bring about the Messiah. David did indeed escape Saul and reigned over Israel as a man after God’s own heart. Paul’s writings form much of the New Testament. Stephen saw the face of God before his death. And Jesus—spoiler alert, He rose from the dead and is still alive and seated at the Father’s right hand, the most praiseworthy person in existence.

And also, don’t be afraid to lean on the examples you see of people persevering right in front of you. There are people in this church right now that I could point out as shining examples of hanging in there through various difficulties—financial hardships, mental illness, physical ailments, faith crises, overcoming hurt, guilt, shame, grief, poor childhoods, recovering from poor decisions as adults. All of you are praiseworthy because you are hanging in there.

So, we are to draw encouragement from the examples of the past, those that I mentioned and the many, many others throughout the Bible, and also the current crop of struggling saints. But then James seems to write one verse—verse 12—that seems not to fit either with enduring trials or with what comes next. So here we are, sitting with a standalone command to not swear by anything, but simply let your yes or no be good enough as is. Famous commentator Matthew Henry actually separates this chapter between verses 11 and 12, and failed to see the connection between these two verses. However, I believe it fits very nicely because it rounds out the instructions for how to hang in there. I believe this verse can be summarized as “above all else, maintain your integrity”.

**(slide 27)** Brothers and sisters, the only times anyone feels the need to invoke an oath before making a statement is either when they are saying something they know is untrue or something they believe the other person will believe is untrue. This is problematic for two reasons. First, the phrase “I swear to God” has been so played out over centuries of this ridiculous practice that it is a red flag that whatever is going to be said is highly likely to be untrue, or, at least, unable to be proven. Secondly, using the phrase in this way seems to indicate that there are different levels of truth to the user’s personal speech—that they cannot be trusted completely unless an oath is invoked.

But, is that the type of reputation we should have? The type of reputation that says, you can trust this person some of the time? Do you want said about you, you can trust 50% of what you say 100% of the time? Of course not! And this is true whether dealing with brothers and sisters in Christ or non-believers. But the question remains, what does this have to do with hanging in there?

Folks, the temptation when we are undergoing trials is going to be to try to make our lives easier. Let’s be honest with each other—a lot of the time, life is hard. People are hard to deal with, tasks are difficult to accomplish. Marriage is hard. Parenting is hard. Being an employee is hard. Owning up to your mistakes is hard. Getting older is hard. Not knowing where your rent money is coming from is hard. Life is hard. And it’s easy to compromise our integrity to make things a bit easier in the moment. Honey, we can’t swing it now, but we’ll go to that marriage conference next year (when you have no intention of ever going). Sure boss, I’ll have that for you tomorrow (when you know it’ll take another week). I burned dinner because our daughter needed my help (and totally not because I was trying to get to a save point in my video game and would have lost a half hour progress if I didn’t).

But your integrity is worth more than a momentary reprieve from life’s difficulties. At the end of your life, it’s not going to matter why your boss got that assignment a day late or why dinner was burned. But it will matter throughout your life whether or not you can be trusted. Church, do not throw away a lifetime of trust for moments of ease. Hang in there.

**(slide 28)** I would like to close with this thought: though life is hard, it is easier when we hang in there together. Begin with the end—Jesus’s glorious return—in mind. Process your conflict with believers in such a way that it leads to restoration of the relationship. Draw encouragement from the heroes of the Bible, and the heroes you know, to finish the race. And do so with integrity, to leave a lasting legacy for those to come. Let’s pray.