

A Season of Hardship

Discussion Notes, August 30, 2026

1. Think about a hard season you have been through. What is one thing that you learned from it?

This week's message was built around one word: remains. James 1:12 set the frame. The blessing does not go to the person who avoids hardship. It goes to the person who stays in it. Paul's letter to the Philippians gave us a real life example in Epaphroditus, a man Paul described three ways: a brother, a fellow worker, and a fellow soldier. Each one of those titles shows a different side of what it looks like to stay when things get hard. The message closed with a challenge. Don't just get through it. Get something out of it. There is a purpose in your pain, and everything that actually matters gets forged in hard times.

Read James 1:12

"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

James was writing to believers who had been scattered and were going through real suffering. He does not start by telling them it is going to be okay. He starts by telling them to stay. God does not promise to remove the trial. He promises to reward the one who stays in it. The crown of life is not about having a comfortable life right now. It is a promise of something that cannot be taken away. The entire sermon was built on this idea. The blessing is on the other side of the trial, not before it. That changes what a hard season is actually for.

2. The blessing goes to the one who stays, not the one who avoids it. How does that shift the way you look at what you are going through right now?

Read Philippians 2:25 to 30

"I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I have sent him the more eagerly, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me."

Paul was in prison when he wrote this. Epaphroditus had traveled all the way from Philippi to Rome to bring Paul a gift from the church. Somewhere on that trip he got so sick that he almost died. But Paul does not call him a victim. He calls him a brother, a fellow worker, a fellow soldier, and he tells the whole church to honor men like this. Epaphroditus could have gone home when things got hard. He did not. He stayed and finished what he came to do. The sermon used him as a picture of what remaining actually looks like. Not something loud or dramatic. Just faithful, steady, and unwilling to quit.

3. The sermon said don't just get through it, get something out of it. What is one thing you want to hold onto from a hard season once the pressure lifts?

Read John 15:4

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."

Jesus said this the night before he was crucified. His disciples were about to walk into the hardest season of their lives. And his answer to that was not a plan or a strategy. It was simple. Stay connected. A branch does not produce fruit by trying harder. It produces fruit by staying attached to the vine. Apart from Jesus, he says, you can do nothing. That is not about failure. It is just how it works. And that is exactly why the sermon kept coming back to the same question: will you remain?

4. What has actually kept you connected to God in a hard season? And what tends to pull you away?

Read John 15:2 and 6

"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit... If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

These two verses sit right next to each other in John 15 and together they show the full picture. Verse 2 tells us that even the branches that are bearing fruit still get pruned. Not because something is wrong, but because God wants more from them. The pruning is not punishment. It is preparation. Verse 6 shows what happens when a branch pulls away completely. It withers. It stops producing anything at all. The sermon said there is a purpose in your pain. These verses are why. God is at work in the hard season, but only in the branch that stays connected.

5. The sermon closed with this: will you remain? What is one decision you can make this week to stay?

Prayer Points

- For those in our group in a hard season right now, that they would have the grace to remain and not just survive but grow.
- For the courage to stay connected to God when we are tempted to pull back in the middle of pain.
- For eyes to see the pruning in our lives not as punishment but as preparation for more fruit.

DEEPER DIVE: Paul and the School of Hard Times

You cannot read Philippians without thinking about who wrote it. Paul wrote this letter from a prison cell. He wrote about joy. He wrote about peace. He wrote about contentment. And he was not writing from a comfortable place. He was writing from a place that should have produced bitterness and defeat. But Paul had learned something through his hardships that changed the way he saw everything. He did not avoid suffering. He went through it, again and again, and let it shape him. The same man who gave us the most encouraging letters in the New Testament is also the man with the longest list of things gone wrong. That is not a coincidence.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23 to 29

"Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one — I am talking like a madman — with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak?"

Paul wrote this because people in Corinth were questioning whether he was a real apostle. His answer was not to list his education or his accomplishments. He listed his suffering. That was his resume. He had been beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and in danger more times than most people face in a lifetime. And he kept going. He kept planting churches, writing letters, and showing up. That is what remaining looks like stretched out over a whole life. The hardship did not disqualify him. It shaped him into exactly the person God used.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7 to 10

"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul had something in his life that was painful and he wanted it gone. We do not know exactly what it was. What we do know is that he asked God three times to take it away and God said no. What God said instead was that his grace was enough and that his power actually shows up best when we are weak. Paul stopped asking for the hard thing to be removed and started leaning into it. That is what remaining looks like when God does not change the circumstance. You stop fighting the season and start trusting the One who is using it.

Read Philippians 4:11 to 13

"Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

Paul says he learned contentment. He did not just have it. He learned it. And you do not learn contentment in easy seasons. You learn it by going without, by going through, by staying when everything in you wants to leave. That famous verse about doing all things through Christ is not

a motivational quote. It is the conclusion of a man who had been through more than most of us will ever face and came out the other side still standing. He remained. And what grew in him through all of it could not have come any other way.

Deeper Dive Discussion Questions

1. Paul says he learned contentment. It was not something he was born with. What has a hard season taught you that you could not have learned any other way?
2. God told Paul his grace was enough when Paul wanted the hard thing removed. Have you ever kept asking God to change a circumstance and he did not? What did you do with that?
3. Paul's list of suffering reads like a resume, not a complaint. What would it look like to see your hard seasons as something that qualifies you rather than disqualifies you?