Sticky Faith: Holding On When God Doesn't Do What You Expected

There is a particular kind of pain that comes not from doubting God exists, but from believing he can change your situation and watching him not do it. You have prayed. You have waited. You have tried to do the next right thing. And yet the diagnosis hasn't changed, the relationship hasn't healed, the financial pressure hasn't lifted. You find yourself whispering a question you are almost afraid to say out loud: God, I know you can. So why aren't you?

That question is not a sign of weak faith. It is a sign of honest faith. And it has been asked by some of the most courageous, committed people who ever walked with God.

The Grit That Faith Requires

In 2007, psychologist Angela Duckworth led a group of researchers in studying what most accurately predicts success. After analyzing talent, intelligence, resources, and planning, they landed on one defining ingredient. They called it grit — perseverance toward long-term goals. Not the excitement of starting something, but the stubbornness to keep going when the excitement fades and the difficulty sets in.

Faith requires that same quality. James 1:2-4 describes trials not as enjoyable experiences, but as the very things that produce perseverance in us. The trial itself is not the gift. What grows inside us through the trial is. Hebrews 11:1 describes faith as a confidence in what we hope for — but there is often a significant gap between what we hope for and what we are currently experiencing. What we do in that gap defines the depth of our faith.

A Courageous Man in a Dark Cell

Few figures in scripture seem less likely to struggle with doubt than John the Baptist. He was bold enough to confront powerful rulers. He built his entire life around a singular calling. He was the one who pointed others toward Jesus, declaring him the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.

But John was also sitting in a prison cell.

He had spoken the truth to King Herod, and rather than receiving repentance, he received chains. Historians believe he sat in that prison for close to two years. And as his friends brought him reports of everything Jesus was doing on the outside — healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, raising the dead — John sent them back with a stunning question recorded in Luke 7:18-23. Are you the one we were expecting, or should we look for someone else?

John knew the messianic promises from Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61. He knew the Messiah would open blind eyes, heal the lame, and proclaim freedom for captives. Jesus was checking every

box. Every box except the one that mattered most to John in that moment. John was still in prison.

What makes this passage so deeply human is that John was not a weak man crumbling at the first sign of trouble. He was a seasoned, courageous servant of God who had endured long enough that the waiting had begun to shake something deep inside him. And rather than walking away quietly or pretending everything was fine, he brought his doubt directly to Jesus.

Notice how Jesus responded. He did not shame John. He did not revoke his calling. In fact, Jesus turned to the crowd and said that among all who had ever lived, no one was greater than John — and he said it at the very moment John was wrestling with uncertainty. That should profoundly encourage anyone who has ever been afraid that their doubts would disqualify them.

Four Ways to Develop a Faith That Sticks

So how do we build the kind of faith that holds on when life is hard and God seems silent? There are four anchors worth driving deep.

First, trust the evidence, not just your experience. Pain has a way of positioning itself so close to us that it blocks out everything else — like the moon during an eclipse, smaller than the sun but capable of casting everything into shadow. The pain is real, but it is not the whole picture. Psalm 34:8 invites us to taste and see that God is good. Psalm 30:5 reminds us that weeping may last through the night, but joy comes in the morning. 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 places our present troubles beside an eternal glory that far outweighs them. We do not pretend the pain does not hurt. We place it beside what we know to be true about God.

Second, be careful not to turn God's promises into personal deadlines. John expected the Messiah to fulfill every promise at once. What he did not yet understand was that Jesus came with two distinct priorities separated by time. His first coming was to deal with the root problem — sin — by dying on the cross and rising again. His return will bring the full restoration of God's order to all things. When we take a genuine promise of God and quietly attach our own preferred timetable to it, we set ourselves up to feel as though God has broken a promise he never made on our schedule. Keep praying. Keep asking. But follow Jesus' own example in Luke 22:42 — Father, if you are willing, take this from me. Yet not my will, but yours.

Third, do not let the difficulty of following Jesus become a reason to stop following Jesus. He never hid the cost. In Matthew 7, Luke 9, and Matthew 5, Jesus was transparent about the narrow road, the call to die to self, and the reality of persecution. Difficulty is not a sign that you have taken a wrong turn. It is often confirmation that you are on the right one.

Fourth, stay close to people who help you keep you close to Jesus. John had friends who risked their own safety to bring him word of what God was doing beyond his prison walls. Pain tempts us to withdraw from the very relationships God would use to strengthen us. Do not let discouragement drive you into isolation.

Holding On

Whatever circumstance feels like a prison right now, the invitation is the same one John received. Not a release date. Not an explanation. But evidence that God is still at work, still faithful, still worth trusting. The pain is real. It is not permanent. And the one who calls you is faithful to do what he has promised.

Hold on.

Here is a list of all scripture references mentioned or alluded to in the sermon:

- James 1:2-3
- Hebrews 11:1
- John 15 (abiding and bearing fruit)
- Luke 8 (parable of the soils)
- Matthew 10:22
- Luke 3 (Herod imprisoning John)
- Luke 7:18-23
- Isaiah 35:2-6
- Isaiah 61:1-2
- Luke 4:21 (Jesus reading Isaiah in the synagogue)
- Romans 12:1
- 1 Peter 1:6-7
- Psalm 34:8
- Psalm 30:5
- 2 Corinthians 4:17-18
- Luke 22:42
- Luke 9:23 (denying self)
- Matthew 7:13-14 (narrow road)
- Luke 9:58 (forsaking worldly comfort)
- Matthew 5:10-11 (persecution)
- Hebrews 13:5 (never leave or forsake)

- Psalm 23:2-4 (green pastures, still waters, valley of shadow)

Closing Benediction

- 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24