

## **John: Doubting Thomas**

**John 20:24-31**

**By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)**

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Please turn with me to the penultimate sermon of John's gospel. This particular section at the close of the chapter records for us the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ in the upper room to the disciples at a time when Thomas, who is also called Didymus, was with them. We pick up the reading at verse 24:

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing."

Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, as we come now to the Scriptures, we thank You that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit and illuminate, make clear to us, the meaning of the words of Scripture tonight. Write it upon our hearts, draw us ever closer to Yourself, be with us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Thomas, he's known, of course, as Doubting Thomas. But that may be a tad unfair. You expect me to try and defend Thomas, and I thought about giving this sermon the title, "Doubting Thomas on Doubting Thomas." Thomas V. Moore, a minister in Richmond, Virginia, and later in Nashville, Tennessee, in the 19th century, became the moderator of the Southern Presbyterian Church. In 1867, he wrote a wonderful book, *The Last Days of Jesus*. Commenting on this particular chapter, and in particular on Thomas, on the character of Thomas, this is what he has to say. He describes Thomas as "a man of gloomy spirit, prone to look on the dark side of everything, and live in the shade. There was little in him of the bright, sunny and hopeful, and hence he was not as ready to believe good news as bad. This frigidity of his temperament made him skeptical, hasty in coming to unfavorable conclusions."

More recently, John MacArthur, from California, just published another wonderful book, it has to be the best produced book in terms of cover. I know you don't judge a book by its cover, but this one, if you judge it by its cover, its wonderful, and it's called, *Twelve Ordinary Men*. It's a book of biographical sketches on the twelve disciples. And this is what he has to say about Thomas: "Thomas was a somewhat a negative person; he was a worry wart, a brooder, tended to be anxious and angst ridden. He was like Eyore in Winnie the Pooh. He anticipated the worst all the time, pessimism, rather than doubt, seems to have been his besetting sin." Not so much a doubter then as a pessimist.

You'll find something very similar in J.I. Packer's book, *Never Beyond Hope*. Packer, it has to be said, is really hard on Thomas, much harder than MacArthur and certainly harder than Moore. Packer points out that Thomas was also called Didymus, which in Greek means twin, and you understand that Thomas in Hebrew also means twin. And who was the other twin? Maybe Matthew, maybe James, we've absolutely no idea. And that Thomas was the less bright of the two, and that he lived with some kind of inferiority complex about it, and it resulted in expressions, not only of gloom, but of pride.

Well, whatever you make of all that, Thomas is a psychologist's dream. It's all based on the most slender evidence imaginable, because the Bible doesn't actually corroborate any of that. Whatever we make of it, and some of it makes for really good sermon material, it's possible to be too hard on Thomas. On the other side, some make Thomas into a kind of hero. The problem with some Christians is that they're just too gullible--which is true. The problem with some Christians is that they just don't ask the hard questions, and Thomas was prepared to stand on his two feet and ask the really hard questions. He wanted empirical evidence before he would believe. They make him out to be the Karl Popper<sup>1</sup> of the first century, because Christians generally are buffoons and

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Popper was the founder of Critical Rationalism. Popper regarded a critical attitude as the most important virtue a philosopher could possess. He called criticism "the lifeblood of all rational thought" and "... all criticism consists in pointing out ... contradictions or discrepancies, and scientific progress consists

gullible, to boot.

## **I. The absence of Thomas.**

Let's turn to the Scriptures, the word of God, and see what the Bible actually says about this. First, let's look at the phenomenon that Thomas was absent. Jesus, on the evening of His resurrection, He's appeared to Mary Magdalene, He's now appeared to John and Peter, and He now appears to the ten disciples; Judas, of course, isn't there, and Thomas is missing. The ten disciples are in the upper room, and we find that in the beginning of chapter 20. There is one obvious lesson; that in being absent, for whatever reason, he missed the blessing. I think that's a fair deduction to draw from the evidence of Scripture. He wasn't there; he missed the blessing. What did he miss? He missed the resurrection appearance of Jesus. Now, you never know what you're going to miss if you don't come to church. Dr. Lloyd-Jones used to say again and again, "You know, we pray for revival, we pray for the outpouring of God's Spirit, and one day that will come, in the way that it came in phenomenal fashion in the middle of the eighteenth century. It came again in the middle of the nineteenth century. It could come. And you're not here. And you'd be kicking yourself for the rest of your life." Just a thought, just a passing thought. Don't miss the means of grace. Don't miss the assembling of God's people together.

Now, in order to understand Thomas' absence, I think we need to examine a little bit of what the Scriptures might say, or what it doesn't say, about Thomas' character. The first account of Thomas in the gospel of John in chapter 10, the story of raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus had gone across the Jordan River. He'd gone many, many miles away from Jerusalem, He'd gone to the location where John had been baptizing, and chapter 10 describes the ministry of Jesus in this location as being one of the most fruitful periods of ministry in His entire public ministry. Many, many people came to faith as a consequence of what Jesus did on the eastern side of the Jordan.

News comes that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, is sick. It's obvious from the gospel records that this home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus was a home that was particular close to Jesus. Jesus seems to have stayed there with them in Bethany near Jerusalem on several occasions. But instead of going to visit Lazarus and Mary and Martha, Jesus decides to continue with His ministry in Judea, saying to the flummoxed disciples that "this sickness was not unto death." Well, you remember what then happens. News then comes that Lazarus has actually died, and Jesus then says, "Now, let's go to Bethany," and the disciples are a little unsure. They say to Jesus, "The last time you were there, they tried to stone You," and it's at this point that Thomas interjects the first words that we

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largely in the elimination of contradictions wherever we find them. This means, however, that science proceeds on the assumption that *contradictions are impermissible and avoidable* ... once a contradiction is admitted, all science must collapse."

have of Thomas in John's gospel. Thomas says, "Let us go with Him that we may die with Him." Now, you can interpret that as pessimism, you can interpret that as gloom, you may look at those words and see despair written all over them. Everything is black. If we go back to Bethany, it's going to be curtains; we're going to be stoned, we're going to be killed, let's just go with Him and die.

But it's also possible to interpret Thomas' words perhaps in a different way. Because the evidence did seem to the disciples that in going back to Bethany Jesus may well face what He had faced before. Now, you may think I'm just like Thomas, and you may well be right. But you have to admire his courage. You have to admire his willingness to stand for Jesus and for the cause of Jesus Christ and his willingness to go, even if it cost him his life. You have to admire that. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means laying down your life--if that's what it takes to be with Jesus. You have to admire the strength of his commitment. This is no dreamy-eyed romantic. This is realism, and as far as Thomas is concerned, it could cost him his life. And I think you have to admire that.

Thomas' love for Jesus shows up again in John 14, this time, of course, in the upper room. Jesus had said to the disciples, "I'm going to prepare a place for you." And He adds those words, "Where I go, you know, and the way you know." And it leads to that famous statement of Jesus, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father but by Me." And it's at that point that Thomas makes his second contribution in the gospels. He says, "We do not know the where You are going." And, "How can we know the way?" We'll never get to where You're going. We'll lose the way. We don't know how to get there. Whatever else you may think about Thomas, here's a man who loves Jesus. Here's a man who wants to be in Jesus' presence, and the thought that most concerns Thomas in John 14, is that there may come a time when he won't be able to *find* Jesus anymore. That he has so fallen in love with Jesus as his Lord and Savior, that the thought of Jesus' absence and him not being able to find Him again, was something that troubled him immensely.

Now, of course, you can psychoanalyze the passage, you can interpret gloom and despair and dimwittedness and that he was slow and that he wasn't quick on the uptake, and that he was the lesser of the twins and you can do all of that psychoanalysis on Thomas, but I have to say the evidence is very very slender. And the one clear and indisputable thing about Thomas is his love for Jesus Christ. He loves Jesus. And the thought of losing Him caused him great pain. The thought of not being in His presence anymore was something that distressed him greatly.

I wonder if that's you tonight? I wonder if you can empathize with Thomas here. That your heart has fallen in love with Jesus Christ?

Thomas wasn't there on that first evening in Jerusalem on the eve of Jesus' resurrection when Jesus appears to the ten disciples, that's the next passage in

which Thomas is mentioned. He's not there. Now, why isn't he there? That's the big question. Why isn't Thomas there? What is he doing? Where is he? And it's so tempting to allow yourself to begin to say something like "Thomas was brooding" and "Thomas was lost in the depths of melancholia," that "Thomas was engulfed by clouds of darkness and that he wanted to wallow in self pity and he didn't want to be in the company of others, least of all, those who would be asking him all kinds of questions. He just wanted to be in his own company." You know, misery likes its own company. You can see how you can let yourself go a little here. Makes for a great sermon, but again I say that the evidence is very, very slender.

The only thing we know for sure is that Thomas wasn't there. And the Bible doesn't tell us why he wasn't there. And he missed a great blessing, whatever the reason. And it may have been due to his personality. It may have been psychological, emotional, spiritual and a combination of all three; it may have been psychosomatic. There are all kinds of explanations. It may have been his pig-headedness, to use a phrase which Jim Packer gets close to using, stubbornness, that accounts for him not being there, but all we know for sure is that he wasn't there. And because he wasn't there, he missed a great blessing.

## **II. The doubt of Thomas.**

Let's look, in the second place, at the doubting of Thomas. According to Packer, Thomas was guilty of what he calls "willful skepticism." I've been trying to follow his line of thought on this and I think I get it. When you know that you're wrong, sometimes, you know, when your spouse tells you that you're wrong, there's something in you that really doesn't want to admit it. So you go on this long expedition to justify your position in order that you may come out looking the one who is principled and clever and resourceful. The problem with some Christians is that they are just too gullible; they didn't consider the complexities of the issues. It was all very well for these ten disciples to say that they had seen Jesus but they hadn't asked the hard questions. Willful skepticism. There's no sense in his words that he hopes his fellow disciples are right; he refuses to give his friends the benefit of the doubt. He places an undue burden on Jesus to prove Himself. He believes that he has good reasons for his position and he says to the disciples when they come to him—the ten—we don't know when, whether it was that Sunday morning or mid-week, whenever that was, we're not sure when but they find him and say to him, "We've seen the Lord." Don't you wish sometimes Scripture was accompanied by little pictures? The expression on Thomas' face. "We've seen the Lord!" And Thomas says, "Unless I can put my finger in the nail prints of His hands and unless I can thrust my hand into His riven side, I will not believe it."

Well, here's Packer doing the psychoanalysis here. When we allow our temperament to get on top of us and control us, it really is a sort of self-

indulgence Packer says. I can't begin to imagine what is going on in Thomas' mind. Absent on a Sunday. Eight days have gone by. Can you imagine the torment? He'd been a disciple for three years. His life has all of a sudden come almost to an end. What's the future? You know, when you get bad news, when somebody calls you into the office and says, "Look, I'm sorry, but we've got to let you go." And you had dreams and aspirations and hopes and everything comes crashing down in an instant. And for the next few days, you don't know which end is up. All kinds of things are flooding into your mind. Can you imagine the stress on Thomas during this time? Maybe that is what he was doing. Maybe that is where he was. Off by himself wondering what he was going to do with the rest of his life. Do you notice on that Sunday evening when he is there with the disciples and the doors are shut, Jesus appears, utters the same words again, "Peace be with you." He *immediately* speaks to Thomas. He immediately says to Thomas, "Reach here your finger, (verse 27) and reach here your hand and put it into my side and be not unbelieving but believing."

Who told Jesus? Who has been talking? No one. Jesus knew. Isn't that a frightening thing and a reassuring thing at the same time. But Jesus knew what Thomas had said to the disciples because He knows everything, because He knows your heart, and He knows your thoughts, and He knows your doubts, and He knows your concerns. And if the commentators are right, He knows your willful skepticism, He knows your brooding, He knows your stubbornness to admit you're wrong even when you know that you're wrong and people are telling you that you're wrong, and you're just trying to justify yourself so that when you do come out of the wash at the other end, you at least will look as if you are the one who has asked all the hard and difficult questions.

And Jesus goes straight for him. "Thomas, reach here your finger and reach your hand and put it into my side." Perhaps we shouldn't be unduly critical of Thomas' demand for evidence. Didn't Jesus on the previous appearance in the upper room, didn't John tell us in verse 20, when He had said this, He showed them. This was when Thomas wasn't there. He showed them what? His hands and His side. And it is only after the disciples had seen His hands and His side that they believed and rejoiced.

It's not as though Jesus is saying that to ask for empirical evidence is wrong. That's part of the reason that Jesus appears again and again. He's giving a testimony, empirical evidence for the resurrection, for the reality of His risen body.

Some commentators, on verse 27, say that what Jesus is actually doing here in verse 27 is shaming Thomas. You know, we don't have adverbs here; John doesn't give us the adverbs describing the tone of voice in which Jesus spoke. Did Jesus speak here sternly? "Thomas, *reach* here your finger and see my hands and *reach* your hand and put it into my side." Was He angry? Was He stern? Was He rebuking? Was He shaming Thomas? Makes for a good sermon.

I find that extraordinarily hard to believe.

And I think what we see here is something of the gentleness of Jesus. “Thomas, if this is what you want to see, if this is the evidence that you desire, then here I am. Thomas, reach here your finger and see my hands and reach here your hand and put it into my side.” Because isn't that so often the way that Jesus deals with us even with our stupidity? Even with our folly? Even with our stubbornness? That one of His attributes that we love and admire so much is His gentleness. He knows our faults; He knows our constitution; He knows what we are made of; and whatever the reason, whatever the sins, whatever the complexities for Thomas' absence and the way that Thomas is demanding empirical evidence and whether that is right or wrong, Jesus bows to it, accepts it. Don't you see here something of the largeness of Jesus' heart? Don't you think self-evident in what Jesus is saying to Thomas is a heart that loves Thomas? A heart that wants to see Thomas now in the fullness of faith? And He's saying to Thomas, “Thomas, come now; don't come unbelievably. Come with faith; come with trust to Me.”

Well, maybe you think that I'm also psychoanalyzing here because the evidence is very slender, but one thing is absolutely clear. There were no lectures, there was no stern rebuke, there was no chastisement of Thomas. I don't know what went on when Jesus met Peter. The Bible doesn't record that. It just says, “And He appeared to Cephas.” That's all the Bible says. It must have been a painful moment for Peter. But likewise here, weary soul, confused soul, troubled soul, questioning soul, wherever you are and whatever it is that you are thinking, here is Jesus saying to you, “Come to Me. Come to Me with you questions. Come to Me with your doubt. Come to Me with your concerns. Come to Me with your demands, and I will be able to answer *all* of them.” Look at just one more little verse from William Bright, history professor at Oxford in the nineteenth century. “How oft, O Lord, Thy face hath shone on doubting souls whose wills were true. Thou Christ of Cephas and of John, Thou art the Christ of Thomas, too.”

### **III. The faith of Thomas.**

But then thirdly, the faith of Thomas. Because in verse 28, after all the psychoanalysis now has been done, Thomas comes out with these extraordinary words: “My Lord and my God.” Faith has been born. A heart that now beats by reason of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit has been born in Thomas and he has seen for himself the glory of Christ. You remember John's point from the very beginning of the gospel? “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God...” And then in verse 14 of the prologue: “And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth.” And Thomas has seen the glory of Christ. A glory that is full of grace and a glory that is full of truth, and he can't help himself now. Whatever doubts, whatever concerns, whatever frustrations, whatever anger, whatever unbelief, whatever it was that

was on Thomas' mind for those eight days; it's all gone now. Because all that he can see now is the glory of Jesus Christ!

But then Jesus says something quite extraordinary. He says, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed?" Then Jesus goes on to say, "Blessed are they who did not see and yet believed." And not so much as a rebuke, I think, to Thomas, but to underline what Jesus has been saying all along in the upper room discourse. "I am going away, but My going away will be to your advantage." Why will it be to my advantage, Jesus, that you go away? "Because unless I go away, the Holy Spirit will not come." And what will be the consequences, Jesus, of the Holy Spirit not coming? "The consequences will be that you won't have a New Testament; you won't have a complete Bible because the canon of Scripture is closed only as a consequence of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to the right hand and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Day of Pentecost."

That's been a theme of Jesus in the upper room discourse. And it is as though John is now making a comment on that because he says in verse 31: "These have been written..." It sounds just like a throw-away phrase, doesn't it? "It is written..." But, you know, Jewish Christian readers of John's gospel would have picked up the phrase immediately because do you know what John is doing here? John is self-consciously adding to the canon of the Old Testament Scriptures because he is saying, "These things have been written in the same way that the Old Testament Scriptures are the written revelation of God, this is now also the written revelation of God."

And Jesus is saying to Thomas, but He's saying it to us, What a blessing it is to believe in Jesus; not because we've seen Him, but because we have His written word—the infallible, inerrant word of God. If I gave you a little test tonight of your orthodoxy and gave you the choice of an hour with Jesus in the parlor, through this door here and straight across and through the next door, and there will be Jesus in all the glory of His resurrected body. You can have that for an hour, **or** for the rest of your lives you can have the Bible in all its completed canon. Which do you choose? Isn't that a tough question? I find that question extraordinarily challenging—to be honest with you. The orthodox answer, by the way, is the Bible. And on this Gideon Sunday, what a reminder that is of the sheer gift that Christ bestows upon the Church. That instead of, and better than a sight of His resurrected body, are the 27 books of the New Testament. Now, I have to say that is a real challenge to me. Is that the way you love the Scriptures? "Today," Calvin says, "we behold Christ in the gospel *no less* than if He stood with us. Therefore, if we decide to see Christ, what will make us happy and blessed, let us learn to believe where we do not see."

Do you know what is going on here in this wonderful little story? Jesus is calling Thomas to Himself.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Come unto me and rest; lay down, O weary one,*



*lay down your head upon My breast.” I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad; I found in Him a resting place, and He has made me glad.*

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, “Behold, I freely give the living water; thirsty one, stoop down and drink, and live.” I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life-giving stream; my thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in Him.*

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, “I am this dark world's Light; look unto Me; your morn shall rise, and all your day be bright.” I looked to Jesus and I found in Him my Star, my Sun; and in that light of life I'll walk, till trav'ling days are done.*

This is not a mere story. Jesus is here tonight, in the word, in the Scriptures, speaking to our hearts. “I heard the voice of Jesus say my name. I heard the voice of Jesus say, “John, Chad, and Bret and Mary and whatever your name is. “Come unto Me and rest.”

I wonder tonight if there is someone here and there's been a restlessness in your soul for a week or months, or perhaps, even years and we've been thinking about it in the Book of Ecclesiastes, the emptiness life without Jesus—the pointlessness, the futility of it, the vanity of it. And you've tried the broken cisterns and you've found them all to be wanting and Jesus is saying, as he was saying to Thomas, “Come unto Me. Bring your doubts; bring your questions; bring your concerns; bring your trouble; bring your sins; bring those terrible sins that you don't even want to talk about and you don't want anybody else to know about. Bring those sins and bring them to Me,” Jesus says. “Cast them upon Me and do it believing and do it with faith, and I will give you rest—rest for your troubled and wearied souls.” And Jesus, my friends, is the same yesterday and today and forever. Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, we thank you for our Savior, Jesus Christ, and we pray the lost and weary, troubled souls in our sanctuary tonight who have never put their trust in Jesus. Lord, call them sovereignly and effectually by Your Spirit, even right now and bring them to Yourself, we pray; and do it to glorify Your great name. Amen.*

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