

Lesson 9

John 20 - Thomas

The pursuit of righteousness has a cost...

Introduction

In the synoptic gospels and Acts, Thomas appears only in the listings of the apostles. John, however, presents us with a few more glimpses of this apostle.

- John 11.16 where he shows devotion and courage in going back to Jerusalem: *Let's go too so that we may die with him.*
- John 14.5 where Jesus is comforting the disciples about His departure. He was going to prepare a place for them and that they knew the way to get there. Thomas replied, *Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?* Jesus answers, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,* John 14.6.
- John 20.25 where Thomas did not believe the report that Jesus had risen from the dead. *If I don't see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe.*
- John 20.28 where Jesus appears eight days afterward and tells Thomas, *Put your finger here and look at my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Don't be faithless, but believe.* Thomas answered, *My Lord and my God!*
- John 21.1-3 where Thomas and other disciples accompany Peter on a fishing trip where they caught nothing. After daybreak Jesus appeared on the seashore and directed to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. When they did they caught 153 fish, John 21.11.

Three times John identifies Thomas' other name: *Didymus* or "Twin."⁹ Thomas is the Greek word translated from Hebrew or Aramaic which both mean "twin." Who exactly was Thomas' twin is not known.

Thomas the Skeptic

Thomas is most often portrayed in a mostly negative light and that view appears to be justified when examining the statements of Thomas John left us with. It seems that he has a talent for thinking the worst is always going to happen. Evidently, he had a fatalistic outlook. It seems that he struggles with doubt. He appears to be a skeptic.

John 20.24 tells us that Thomas was not present on the night of Jesus' resurrection when Jesus first appeared to the apostles. Why was he not there? Could it have been because of his pessimism and negativity? It's all speculation, but it would be very easy to imagine him thinking the worst-case scenario had happened. Can you hear him saying, *what's the use? Why go?* Can you see him feeling alone? His

⁹ John 11.16; 20.24; 21.2.

hopes totally crushed? His heart ripped out of him because of what happened at the cross? It is in these moments where the natural human reaction is to simply withdraw. At this moment, for him, there was no possible way to be in that room with all his friends.

Think of the emotional toll of the previous 72 hours. Judas has betrayed Jesus and committed suicide. Jesus has been crucified. His disciples did not expect this to happen, despite all of Jesus direct statements that it would. They had not put it together. And at this moment they were trying to process all the events they witnessed.

But Thomas (called “Twin”), one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were telling him, “We’ve seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “If I don’t see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe,” John 20.24-25.

Thomas’ words in verse 25 are those of someone who has suffered a major disappointment and doesn’t want to be let down again. He had bought in to Jesus, he believed Him to be the Messiah . . . and yet now all he can see is Jesus’ tomb. Crucified Messiah? Those two words didn’t go together. And now add, crucified, *resurrected* Messiah? How could that be?

The skeptic says, people can talk themselves into anything. After all, some people still believe Elvis lived long after his “supposed” death.

Today we might paraphrase Thomas’ words like this:

“I’d love to believe that Jesus is alive, but you know you can want something so badly you can almost talk yourself into it. I’m going to need the kind of evidence that will convince me that the pre-death Jesus, the Jesus who went into the tomb, is exactly the same Jesus as the Jesus who came out. No swap. No twin hidden in the background. No misty, fuzzy edges blurred with a nice camera. Unless I see the marks, unless I put my hand into the wound, I will not believe it.”¹⁰

What Thomas is calling for is the most certain evidence that the pre-death Jesus is the same Person as the resurrected Jesus. He doesn’t want to be gullible. In some ways he probably felt betrayed and wanting to be sure of what he believed as true, he most certainly didn’t want to experience the pain of being let down again. The skeptic in Thomas is saying that he wanted to be assured that the Jesus who came out of the tomb was the same Jesus who died on the cross. It was common for criminals to be nailed to a cross (they were otherwise tied to the cross with rope), but Jesus had a unique wound. His crucifixion happened on the day before one of the holiest days in Israel. In order to get the bodies off the crosses before sundown, soldiers came around to break the legs of the two men on either side of Jesus. This would prevent them from moving up to be able to breathe. Suffocation would happen in minutes. When they got to Jesus, they saw He had already died, so just to make sure a soldier rammed his spear into the side of Jesus. This is the wound that Thomas specifies in verse 25 . . . because if he could see that . . . he would know *with certainty* that it was the same Jesus. He doesn’t want to be wrong or believe anything that comes along and call it legitimate.

¹⁰ Carson, D. A. “Doubting Thomas.” *D. A. Carson Sermon Library*. Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2016.

Thomas' Confession

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and look at my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Don't be faithless, but believe." Thomas responded to him, "My Lord and my God!" John 20.27-28.

His statement is amazing. Why does he make such a specific confession? First, Jesus wasn't present when Thomas made his demands the week before. Now, eight days later, Jesus appears during their gathering and without being prompted directs His attention to Thomas – telling him to look at his hands and put his hands into His side. *Don't be faithless, but believe!* Because Jesus is God, He didn't have to be physically present to know what Thomas had demanded.

Think also about what would have been going on in Thomas' mind over the previous week. Remember, he had not seen Jesus on the day He resurrected. He made his demand and now has days to think about it. Can you imagine what is going on in his mind? Can you hear him wrestling with thoughts like, *there is no way He is alive. But... those women said He is. No, He can't be alive. But what if He is? How can the Messiah allow himself to be crucified? He is supposed to bring victory. How could they kill someone who walked on water, calmed storms, and raised people from the dead? How do you kill someone like that? No, He can't be alive ... but suppose He is...*¹¹

Think of how he would have replayed what he had heard from Jesus during the earthly ministry. What about Jesus's statement the week before last, on the night before his crucifixion:

Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him." "Lord," said Philip, "show us the Father, and that's enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been among you all this time and you do not know me, Philip? The one who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who lives in me does his works, John 14.6-10.

One wonders if Thomas thought about Jesus' other sweeping statements he would have heard:

- John 1.29 – Jesus is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.
- John 6 – Jesus is the bread of life who will lose His life so that others might live.
- Mark 10.45 – Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many.

Maybe these and other statements like this were going through his mind that week as he wrestled with the concept of Jesus the Messiah dying on a cross. Now ... standing there seeing Jesus, *the Jesus*, the skeptic is astonished at the sight. In his words we see the highest adoration and devotion. Jesus is the God who goes to the cross. He was wounded for *our sins* and *iniquities*. What happened on the cross was now beginning to look different. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Let's look at Thomas' confession again.

¹¹ Ibid., Carson.

My Lord and My God. See how intensely personal this confession is. This is *his* confession. This is the confession we must all make. *You, Jesus, are MY Lord and MY God.* Unless we are willing to do that, we are nothing. Our faith must become personal . . . and that is where Thomas is in our text.

How Do We Come to Faith Today?

After Thomas' confession, Jesus said:

"Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name, John 20.29-31.

It was one thing for those who actually saw the resurrected Jesus over the course of those 40 days .. they literally touched and had dialogue with Him. But Jesus would soon ascend into heaven. What about us? We haven't seen the wounds. We haven't touched Jesus. How do we come to faith today?

The answer is that we listen to the firsthand witnesses of the first century. Thomas was blessed because he literally saw and believed, but there are countless others coming who would not be able to see but still believe. All the things that happened with Jesus – happened to produce faith in Jesus as the Christ – so that those who believe on Him will have everlasting life.

Perhaps D. A. Carson said it best:

God has disclosed himself in a real God-man, in real history, such that this God-man, this Word made flesh, could be touched and handled. He died on a real cross and rose from a real grave and was seen by real people. All of our faith turns on the significance of those events.

*He heard their words, but not for him that easy faith
That trades the truth for sentimental sigh.
Unless he saw the nail marks in his hands himself
And touched his side, he'd not believe the lie.
Then Jesus came to them, although the doors were locked:
"Cast away doubt and reach into my side.
Trace out the wounds the nails left in my broken hands,
And understand I am the resurrection and the life."

Long years have passed, and still we fear the face of death;
It steals our loved ones, leaving us undone.
It mocks our dreams and calls to us with icy breath,
The final terror when life's course is run.
But this I know: my Lord traveled this way before,
His body clothed in immortality.
The sepulcher's sting is drawn, the power of sin destroyed.
Death has been swallowed up in his mighty victory.*