

DOUBTING THOMAS

A Look at the Disciple Commonly Known as “Doubting Thomas”

If you know anything about Thomas, you probably know that he is generally called “Doubting Thomas.” He was the only one of the eleven disciples not present when Jesus appeared to them that first Easter evening (Judas Iscariot had already committed suicide). When the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, he replied, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (Jn. 20:25). Thomas’ words are strong, yet I still think “Doubting Thomas” is an unfortunate nickname, because in reality *all* the disciples doubted until they saw the resurrected Lord with their own eyes (Jn. 20:19-20; Mk. 16:10-11).

Thomas has some high points that often get overlooked. For example, consider this episode from John 11: “Then after this [Jesus] said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again’” (Jn. 11:7). It’s an understatement to say that the disciples don’t think this is a good idea. “The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?’” (vs. 8). You can see that the disciples would like Jesus to reconsider. But Jesus explains that Lazarus’ death obliges Him to return to Judea. Don’t gloss over how Thomas responds to Jesus’ desire to return to Judea: “So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him’” (vs. 16). Isn’t that awesome! Thomas is ready to go back to Judea and die with Jesus, if that is what Jesus wants. And he also encourages the other disciples to accompany Jesus regardless of the cost. If Jesus has called His disciples to a mission that may result in martyrdom, Thomas’ response is basically, “So be it.”

Another reference to Thomas is found in John 14. Jesus is preparing His disciples for His departure to heaven and says, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going” (Jn. 14:1-4). When the disciples heard this, they must have thought to themselves, “We do? We don’t even know where you’re going so how can we possibly know the way?” Peter was usually the gutsy disciple to ask the question that the others wanted to ask, but were afraid to. However, on this occasion it was Thomas who asks what Jesus is talking about. If we read between the lines a little, it seems that Thomas’ earnest desire to know where Jesus is going gave him the courage to ask his question. He didn’t care if he looked foolish, because he really wanted to know where Jesus was going, so that he could follow Him wherever He was going.

“Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (vv. 5-6). In unequivocal terms Jesus states His exclusive role in bringing us to the Father. One of the greatest verses in the Bible is a result of Thomas’ sincere question about where Jesus was going.

Returning to John 20, we’re told that eight days later, Jesus appeared to the disciples again, and this time Thomas was with them (vs. 26). Jesus approached Thomas and said, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe” (vs. 27). Jesus directly, but gently deals with Thomas’ doubt. “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (vs. 28). Thomas’ great confession affirms the deity of Christ. Jehovah Witnesses deny this by saying that Thomas is saying something like, “Oh, my God.” But it hardly seems fitting for a Jewish disciple to see his risen Lord and respond by taking God’s name in vain. Rather, Thomas’ confession is a clear acknowledgment that Jesus is his Lord and his God. This is the climax of John’s gospel. Thomas provides all of us with an example of what we must believe and confess in order to be saved (John 20:29; see Rom. 10:9).

Ancient testimony says that “Thomas carried the gospel as far as India. There is to this day a small hill near the airport in Chennai (Madras), India, where Thomas is said to have been buried. There are churches in south India whose roots are traceable to the beginning of the church age, and tradition says they were founded under the ministry of Thomas. The strongest traditions say he was martyred for his faith by being run through with a spear—a fitting form of martyrdom for one whose faith came of age when he saw the spear mark in his Master’s side” (John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men*, p. 164).

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