

Faithful Thomas!

by Martin G. Collins

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Poor Thomas! Down through the centuries, theologians have labeled this apostle as "Doubting Thomas." This is not the way a true Christian and apostle of Jesus Christ would want to be remembered! Yet, because of one incident recorded in John 20:24-29, this incomplete picture has overshadowed his admirable character traits from which we can glean a valuable example.

Altogether, the New Testament mentions Thomas in eight passages, of which four are lists of the apostles (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). If we had only the record of the first three gospels, Thomas would be just a name to us, a disciple and apostle without personality. But the apostle John, filling in some of the details the synoptists left out, includes more intimate details we need to learn and understand from Thomas' life with Christ.

The name *Thomas* comes from the Aramaic word *te'oma* which means "twin." John uses the Greek equivalent, *didymus*, three times (John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2). It is uncertain whose twin Thomas was, or even if it was one of the other disciples, as some have speculated. He is linked with Matthew in Matthew 10:3 and with Philip in Acts 1:13. However, this may indicate a personal friendship, similar interests or joint responsibilities with them.

The New Testament gives few concrete facts about his life. It is certain that Thomas was a Jew, and probably a Galilean (Acts 1:11), but we know absolutely nothing about his family, place of residence or occupation.

What do we know about Thomas? He was present at the raising of Lazarus where he showed his loyalty to Christ (John 11:16). During Jesus' last Passover, he asked the way to God the Father (John 14:5). He was absent when Jesus first appeared to the disciples after the resurrection (John 20:24), and when he was told of it, he was skeptical (John 20:25). Later, Christ appeared in his presence at least twice (John 20:26-29; 21:1-2). Finally, we know he lived with the other apostles in Jerusalem before the Holy Spirit came (Acts 1:13-14). After this, Thomas disappears from the biblical record.

Three Admirable Traits

But, in the way of spiritual example, there is much more to Thomas. In John's account, he exhibited three positive traits which should be an integral part of every Christian's character.

First, *when Thomas saw what he ought to do, nothing kept him back*. When Lazarus became ill, Jesus expressed his intention of returning to Judea. Thomas urged the disciples to accompany Him even though they might die doing so: "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" (John 11:16). Thomas backed his statement by action. In contrast, Simon Peter's boast lacked commitment when he said, "Lord, I am ready to go with you, both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). These proved to be mere words, as Peter denied Christ three times (verses 54-62).

Second, *when Thomas saw what he ought to do, he urgently wanted to know how to do it*. At his last Passover service with Jesus Christ, not afraid to show his ignorance, he asked, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" (John 14:5). Thomas' question reveals

him to be a seeker of truth and understanding. His naturally cautious temperament did not close his mind to further knowledge.

Third, *when Thomas saw what he had to believe, he urgently wanted to prove it, and when he did, he had no doubts*. Why Thomas was not present when the other disciples saw Christ appear is a mystery (John 20:24-29). Some commentators suggest he may have retired to some quiet spot to mourn Christ's death. Even after hearing the accounts of Christ's appearances to the others and to Mary Magdalene, he refused to believe that it had happened. He replied, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe" (verse 25).

Scripture is silent about the reason for his doubt. Maybe he thought his friends were only trying to cheer him up. Maybe he remembered them being wrong before on the Sea of Galilee when they had mistaken Christ for a spirit (Matthew 14:26).

All he wanted was the same evidence they had received. The other disciples had not believed until they had seen the resurrected Christ either (Mark 16:11-13; Luke 24:11-12). The news Thomas heard seemed too good to be true. But he did not reject what he heard; he simply wanted to test or prove all things (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Total Commitment

The story of Thomas shows that the disciples were not a group of blind followers who were ready to believe anything. They, especially Thomas, insisted on proof and evidence. Thomas' doubt was the kind that a person who wants to believe shows. His search for the truth prompted him to question the other apostles until he attained a personal *conviction* regarding the resurrection.

This is not the ideal, for faith is built upon evidence that is not seen (Hebrews 11:1). All that Thomas heard Christ say regarding His death and resurrection should have been sufficient without the aid of sight (John 20:29). It would have been better to distrust his senses than to discredit Christ's words. Nevertheless, once convinced of Christ's resurrection, his faith was stirring.

When the resurrected Christ appeared to him eight days later, Thomas' immediate reaction was wonderful: "And Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and My God!'" (John 20:28). Because of Thomas' positive character traits, God was able to open his mind and work with him. His faith was instant and strong.

We should be encouraged by Christ's reply in verse 29: "Jesus said to him, 'Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" Because we have believed and obeyed without physical proof, Almighty God pronounces a special blessing upon us.

Using the three positive character traits of Thomas will enable us to come to the same deep, heart-felt realization that he reached. At that point he committed himself to the service of his great Master, and tradition says that he preached in Parthia and northwestern India where he was martyred in His service.

We, too, as His modern-day disciples, must internalize this personal commitment to our Elder Brother and High Priest. Like Thomas, we must realize who we serve, and cry out in faith, "My Lord and my God!"

