

Meet Thomas

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[0 : 00] Poor Thomas. A couple of millennia of bad press he's had to endure. All most of us know about him is that he doubted. That is his most famous characteristic.

Seemingly, of all the disciples, the only one who doubted, or so it would appear. Have you ever heard of doubting Peter, or doubting Philip, or doubting James? I don't think so.

But I suppose Thomas, in that regard, does serve a useful purpose. He serves as an example of how not to respond to Jesus.

Don't be like Thomas. The preacher can solemnly warn any potential doubters. Now, all of this is just a little unfair.

And this evening, I want us to meet Thomas and get to know him as he is presented to us in the Scriptures. Understand him and learn from him.

[1 : 08] And remember that his name is Thomas, and not doubting Thomas. Matthew, Mark, and Luke only mention Thomas in a list of names of the disciples.

And only John makes reference to him in any real-life situations. And he does so on three occasions. And this evening, I want to consider those three occasions when we are presented with, when we meet Thomas, and see what we can learn from him.

We've read one passage, which is the third occasion when we meet with Thomas in John's Gospel. The first occasion is in chapter 11, and it would be helpful if you have your Bibles open and can follow with me the passages as we consider them.

There are three passages that we will be considering this evening. First of all, we meet Thomas in chapter 11. And the Thomas that we are presented with on this occasion is the Thomas I'm describing as Thomas the Courageous Disciple.

Thomas the Courageous Disciple in John chapter 11. Now, I'm not going to read the passage. I'll make reference to one or two verses in it.

[2 : 26] But here on this occasion, in chapter 11 of John's Gospel, the death of Lazarus, we meet Thomas as a bit player in the Lazarus resurrection account.

Now, you remember the story. Lazarus is sick, and his sisters send for Jesus. After waiting for two days, he declares to his disciples that they will now proceed for Bethany.

And the disciples protest. There in chapter 11 and verse 8, we read the response of the disciples.

The disciples said to him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you.

And are you going there again? The disciples are none too enthusiastic at this proposal that they all had to Bethany. There is danger in Bethany.

A danger awaits them. And, well, Jesus continues to speak to them. And after further words, he plainly states to his disciples that Lazarus is dead, but reaffirms his intention to head to Bethany.

[3 : 37] And it is at this point that Thomas pipes up with these words directed to the rest of the disciples, who, remember, were less than enthusiastic about a trip to Bethany.

And what does Thomas say to them there in verse 16 of John chapter 11? Let us also go that we may die with him.

Let us also go that we may die with him. The disciples are hesitant. Some reluctant. Others just plain scare at the prospect of a trip to Bethany.

The way of prudence is surely to give Jerusalem a wide berth. All the more so now that Jesus has stated that Lazarus is dead. There seems to be no purpose in risking the opposition and the danger that awaits them so close to Jerusalem.

Nothing can be done for Lazarus, it would seem. And so the disciples, it would seem, have this unanimous position that it is not a good idea to go to Bethany.

[4 : 48] Except Thomas. While the impetuous Peter says nothing, it is Thomas who takes the initiative with a courageous and motivating, let us also go.

Let us also go. It's not even a self-centered, well, I'll go with you, Jesus. I don't know about the rest of these guys, but I'll go. No, let us also go. And words followed by, no doubt, unwittingly and partially insightful, that we may die with him.

So here we have Thomas, ready and willing to follow Jesus to Bethany for a seemingly high-risk funeral. Taking the initiative and motivating and encouraging others who are tempted to drag their feet.

And expressing what we can only fairly interpret as a genuine willingness to face even death out of love for and loyalty to Jesus.

And so I say, courageous Thomas. And as we are presented with courageous Thomas, so I say to you, Christian friend, be like Thomas.

[6 : 02] And even in this incident, there is so much that we can learn and in so many ways in which it can be applied to our Christian life. Obey Jesus, even when you don't understand.

You see, seemingly it wasn't a very sensible thing to do. To head to Bethany, Lazarus has died.

And well, he's dead now. Why go? Why risk the wrath and the danger that awaited them?

And so Thomas, no doubt, along with the others, didn't really understand why Jesus was so intent on going to Bethany. But he didn't need to understand. The master had spoken.

The master had said, this is where we are going to go. This is where I am heading and I want you to come with me. And so it wasn't necessary for him to understand. It was necessary for him to obey. And how often is maybe that our experience? There are occasions when the Lord would take us to places and place us in circumstances that we don't understand. And we don't know the whys and the wherefores.

[7 : 06] And courageous Thomas would say to us and would say to you this evening, obey. Just obey. Just obey Jesus. Even when you don't understand. Because he knows best where he's taking you and what he has in store for you.

But not only does Thomas teach us this lesson, but he also teaches us the importance of encouraging others who are tentative and hesitant and tempted to give up.

There are many round about us. And perhaps we are among them who are hesitant, who are tempted to give up. For whom obeying Jesus and coherent Christian discipleship is proving a very difficult task.

And we are tempted to not go where we would go and not do what we would do. And how good it is to have those round about us who would encourage us.

Who would come with these words, let us also go. Yes, I'm scared as well. I don't know why. But the master has spoken. Let's go together. And again, I highlight this.

[8 : 14] This isn't some kind of macho ego trip that Thomas is on. Well, they're all scared, but I'm brave. No, let us also go. Let's all go together. And accompany our master on this trip that he has set out for us.

What a blessing to have such in a congregation. Those who will stand up and be counted and rally the troops in difficult times, in discouraging times. When there are those who just are discouraged for whatever reason.

And there are plenty reasons for being discouraged in our own lives and family circumstances. And indeed, as the Christian church in our own land. And what a good thing it is to have those who would come and say to us, let us also go.

Let's continue forward. Let's continue preaching the good news of the gospel. Let's continue reaching out with this gospel that we have been given. In the confidence and assurance that as we obey our master, so he will bless us.

And so he will own our efforts. Let us also go. Says encouraging, courageous Thomas. Be obedient, even when you don't understand what the Lord has in mind for you.

[9 : 33] Encourage others who are discouraged and hesitant. And be courageous. Dare to be a Thomas. Dare to stand up for Jesus. And risk ridicule and rejection out of love for and loyalty to him.

Just like Thomas. So we are presented with, on this occasion, in the Lazarus resurrection account, Thomas, the courageous disciple.

But we meet Thomas again in John's gospel in chapter 14. We simply need to turn a couple of pages in our Bibles to John chapter 14.

And on this occasion, we are describing Thomas, and I hope in what I go on to say, you will realize why, as Thomas the honest disciple.

We've met Thomas the courageous disciple. But here in this passage, we meet Thomas the honest disciple. Here in chapter 14, we are in a situation where Jesus is very conscious that the time of his death is approaching.

[10:41] It's imminent. And there is an intensity, an urgency in his words that he directs to his disciples. He is preparing his disciples for his imminent departure.

And he is concerned for them. He is concerned for how they will respond to this parting that is fast approaching. And so we read, and the passage begins, the chapter begins with these words of Jesus.

Let not your hearts be troubled. Let not your hearts be troubled. I don't want you to be concerned. I don't want you to be worried about what awaits you, as I will soon be parting from you.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, says the Lord. He wants to assure them that though there will be a parting, they will in due course be reunited with him.

And so we read there in verse 4, You know the way to where I am going. He's saying, yes, I am going to be leaving you. Yes, there will be a parting. Yes, there will be a separation.

[11:46] But don't worry. Don't be troubled. Because you know the way to where I am going. So these words of Jesus directed to his disciples are words that are intended to help them, to encourage them as they face a difficult time.

Now, that is all very well. And the intention of Jesus is commendable. And we would expect no less from him. But there is a problem. There is what we might call a small problem, but a fundamental problem.

And it is this. That the disciples haven't a clue what he's talking about. You see, the intention of Jesus is a very worthy one to encourage them and to support them as they confront, or will soon be confronting this time.

But they don't understand what he is talking about. Now, what do you do in such circumstances? Maybe you've been in such circumstances that somebody has been explaining something to you, and maybe to a group of people, and it's all very good stuff, no doubt.

But you don't actually understand what is being said. Now, what do you do? Now, the majority of us opt for this approach. Keep quiet and don't let on that you don't understand.

[13:01] You know the situation. Maybe it's in a classroom situation or somebody's explaining something to you. You really don't understand, but you just pretend that you understand. Who wants to be the sucker who admits to not understanding?

Well, it's the sucker who is honest enough to admit his ignorance. And the sucker who is passionate enough about wanting to be with Jesus that he is not prepared to let this go without understanding. And who is this sucker? Well, that's right. It's Thomas. Honest Thomas. You see, Thomas, the prospect of being separated from Jesus is such an appalling one.

It's such a disturbing one that when Jesus suggests that they shouldn't be concerned because there is a way in which he can be reunited with him, he needs to know what that involves.

He's not prepared to simply pretend that he understands, and then when Jesus is gone to say, Now, how do we get there? Remember that time when Jesus said that we know the way, but what's the way?

[14:03] We should have asked. No, he's not prepared to risk that. No, Thomas and Thomas alone, honest Thomas, says, Jesus, we don't understand. Thomas bites the bullet and asks the question.

Nobody else has the guts to ask. Lord, we don't know where you are going. So how can we know the way? We don't know where you're going.

You say that we know, but we don't know. How can we know the way? And it is thanks to the honesty of Thomas. Thanks to his intense desire to be with Jesus, because behind this question there is this worthy, commendable, heartwarming passion of Thomas.

To be with Jesus. He wants to be with Jesus. And that is why he asked this question. He cannot contemplate being separated from Jesus. And thanks to the honesty of this question, and thanks to this intense desire of Thomas, Jesus, in answering Thomas, grants us these most wonderful, self-revealing words.

I am the way and the truth and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. There in verse 6, in response to the question of Thomas, Jesus said to him, I am the way and the truth and the life. [15:28] No one comes to the Father except through me. And how many countless multitudes have been brought to understand who Jesus is, and been enabled to put their trust in him by these words being explained to them, by preachers and indeed by ordinary Christians, down through the centuries.

And is your own heart not warm this evening as you hear once again these glorious words of Jesus? I am the way, the truth, and the life.

Well, thank Thomas for that. You see, if Thomas hadn't asked the question, it's reasonable to presume that Jesus wouldn't have given the answer. You see, an answer comes in response to a question.

And it is thanks to Thomas' question, thanks to honest Thomas that we have here recorded for us in the scriptures, these wonderful words of Jesus.

Honest Thomas. And so I say to you this evening, be like Thomas. Be like Thomas. Perhaps you're visiting this evening, or perhaps you regularly come, but there are many things you don't understand as you hear sermons being preached a week in, a week out.

[16:47] Maybe this evening there will be something that is said that isn't clear to you and you don't understand. What will you do? Will you be like the majority of disciples who say, well, I don't understand, so be it.

Hopefully next week I'll understand, or maybe next month, or maybe sometime in the future. No, be like Thomas. Ask. If you don't understand something, ask. Maybe there are aspects of the Christian faith, of Christian belief that you can't get your head around, that you don't get.

What are you going to do? Well, ask. Seek out those who will be able to help you and explain to you. Be like Thomas. You see, Thomas realized that the issues were so great, that the matter was of such import that he couldn't simply keep quiet.

He couldn't wait to see if somebody else would ask. No, he asks the questions that needed to be asked. Maybe you're a Christian, and yet there is so much that you don't understand, that isn't clear to you, and I'm sure that must be the case for all of us here this evening.

Are you too proud or too embarrassed to admit that there are things that you don't understand?

Ask. Be like Thomas. Others will thank you for it.

[18:05] You see, even the disciples that surrounded Thomas were, I'm sure, grateful that Thomas had the courage to ask because they were no doubt asking the same question.

They no doubt had the same concerns. In fact, the manner in which Thomas makes his question known makes that clear. In verse 5, Thomas said to him, Lord, we do not know where you are going.

You see, we do not know. It wasn't just, oh, simple Thomas. He didn't understand. The rest all understood. No, none of them understood. We don't know where you're going. And yet, thanks to Thomas, they all discovered the answer to the question.

So you ask, and don't be embarrassed or ashamed to do so. You will be blessed, and perhaps many others will be blessed with you. Thomas, the honest disciple.

But then we come to the final passage that we're going to be considering briefly this evening, the passage that we read in John chapter 20. It's the third occasion where we meet Thomas in this gospel.

[19:05] And in this passage, we will describe Thomas in two ways. First of all, Thomas, the heartbroken disciple. We've met Thomas, the courageous disciple.

We've met Thomas, the honest disciple. Now, in the first instance, considering this passage in chapter 20, we meet Thomas, the heartbroken disciple. This is our final encounter with Thomas, until heaven at any rate.

And here we meet Thomas as he is generally known and described. We meet doubting Thomas. But I prefer to call him the heartbroken disciple. From all that we have said already, it is clear that Thomas loved Jesus.

It is clear that he had a sincere desire to be loyal to him and even die with him. But he had, with the others, failed Jesus at his hour of greatest need.

He too had fled from Gethsemane. He had then, following that act of cowardice, he had then heard the harrowing reports of John and the woman concerning the brutal death of his master, of the one

he loved.

[20 : 18] And Thomas, rest assured, Thomas was heartbroken by what he heard. Thomas was heartbroken. And not only was he heartbroken, he was overwhelmed by guilt and sorrow and confusion and all that had transpired and his sorry participation in the events.

And then, this sorrowing, heartbroken, confused disciple, then his world is turned upside down and inside out by the reports he is confronted with.

Jesus is alive. The disciples assured him that Jesus had visited them on Sunday evening. And they seemed so sure in the passage that we've read.

These are the words that they directed Thomas. We have seen the Lord. We have seen the Lord. Now, what will he do? What will Thomas do? Will Thomas go with the flow and pretend to believe? It's no fun being the one doubter. You see, here he is. He was the only one who wasn't there. You could say, well, he's an unlucky guy. The only one who wasn't there. And now, what does he do? The only one who doubts?

[21 : 30] The only one who doesn't believe? Not Thomas. You see, Thomas seems to appreciate the enormity of what is being claimed and the implications of the resurrection as regards who Jesus is.

Hence, his eloquent confession when he does come to believe that we'll be noting in a couple of moments. You see, this claim of the other disciples cannot be believed without evidence.

This is the manner in which he considers things. He is not willing to take even the words of the disciples as sufficient evidence. The issues are too great.

The implications too transcendental. The prospect of believing only for his hopes to be dashed when it all proves to be a false dawn or a cruel illusion is too much for him.

And so he doubts. He doubts. He refuses to believe. Should he have believed? Yes, he should have believed. Will we, will you, condemn him for not believing?

[22 : 37] Well, let him who has never doubted throw the first stone. Notice that all Thomas is asking for is the same evidence the other disciples seemingly also needed.

That in verse 20 of chapter 20, we read, when he had said this, this is on the occasion that Jesus presents himself before the other disciples, when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side, then the disciples were glad.

Then the disciples were glad. You see, they had had precisely the evidence offered to them that Thomas was asking for. He wasn't asking for more. Remember also that as Luke records for us, the other disciples thought Jesus was a ghost until he showed them his hands and feet.

So here we have Thomas, doubting Thomas, yes, but I prefer to describe him as the heartbroken disciple who realizes the implications of what is being said are so great that he is not able, he is not willing to believe until he sees with his very own eyes.

But then we meet finally in this same passage, Thomas, the worshiping disciple. And I wonder before we move on and consider the words that are recorded for us, these wonderful words of confession of Thomas as Jesus comes before him.

[23 : 59] But before we get to that point, just speculate, consider for a moment with me. What would that week have been like for Thomas? That week between being told by his friends, by the other disciples, we have seen the Lord, and then in verse 26, we're told eight days later, the following Sunday, what would that week have been like for Thomas?

Can you imagine what it would have been like for him? Do you think that Thomas was entirely close to the possibility that Jesus was alive? Was it not rather his greatest and deepest longing that Jesus would appear to him?

Is that not what he wanted more than anything else? Did he want to believe? Of course he wanted to believe. It was what he most wanted to be true, that Jesus be alive.

And so he has this agonizing wait until Jesus presents himself to Thomas. And the agonizing wait comes to a close, and Jesus appears just as he had done one week before, and Thomas is present.

He is present, and you bet he was present. I'm sure Thomas didn't leave the gathered disciples for the whole of that week. If there were duties to be performed or errands to be run, Thomas would have said, not me.

[25 : 20] Somebody else can go and buy the roll. Somebody else can go and do that errand. Not me. I am not leaving this place. I am not going to miss out again. I am staying put.

And so this agonizing week transpires, and Jesus appears once again, and Thomas is present. And Jesus addresses Thomas, and his words reveal how much he knows Thomas.

Thomas had not seen Jesus, but Jesus had heard Thomas pronounce those chilling words, I will not believe, there in verse 25, or as we have it here, I will never believe.

As he spoke these words, Jesus seemingly was not present, but Jesus heard those words. Jesus saw and heard Thomas express himself in this way, I will not believe.

But Jesus presents himself there before Thomas. And how does Thomas respond? Is Thomas true to his original demand that he had to put his finger where the nails were, put his hand in Jesus' side?

[26 : 32] By no means. He is itching to believe, and seeing Jesus, and hearing Jesus, is more than enough. And so Thomas cries out these words, my Lord, and my God.

Thomas is presented with the same evidence the other disciples had enjoyed one week before. But the words that he expressed reveal a depth of understanding and discernment never before expressed by any disciple from the lips of Thomas, my Lord, and my God.

We're not told that the other disciples responded in that way when they first met Jesus in similar circumstances. But Thomas, yes, my Lord, and my God.

He addresses Jesus as Lord, and he addresses him as very God of very God. No clearer confession in all the Gospels as to the identity of Jesus and from the lips of Thomas, worshipping Thomas.

And so I say to you this evening, be like Thomas. Be like Thomas. Perhaps you doubt. Perhaps you doubt. Perhaps you struggle to believe.

[27 : 52] Perhaps you have said or thought in the depth of your heart, of your mind, I can't believe. I will never believe. This isn't for me.

Well, I say to you, be like Thomas. Move on from that place where you have been and where so many have been. Move on and come and recognize that Jesus stands before you even this evening as he is presented to you in the Scriptures.

And as he says to you, as he said to Thomas, peace be with you. Here I am. It's me. I'm alive. And like Thomas, would you but worship this Jesus?

Would you but cry out to him, my Lord and my God? You see, he comes to you. He comes to all of us this evening.

And if you hear his voice as he speaks to you through his word, then, like Thomas, there is no need to put your hand in the side or your finger where the nails were or any other tests or signs that you were looking for up until this evening, they're not necessary.

[29 : 02] They're all not necessary. He stands before you and he says to you, peace be with you. Here I am. All that is needful for all of us this evening, all that is needful is that we would but bow down before him and cry out with Thomas, my Lord and my God.

Will you do so? Let us pray. Our great God, we come before you and we thank you for your word and we thank you that as we turn to it and as we meditate upon it, we are brought before the very living and vital and life-changing word of God.

We pray that it would be so and that it would have that powerful effect in our lives even this evening that we would all who are here gather this evening, know what it is with Thomas to bow down before Jesus, the risen Jesus, the reigning Jesus, the loving and forgiving Jesus and that we would cry out, my Lord and my God and that we would cry out these words with an understanding and with a commitment that he would indeed be our Lord, that he would indeed be the one who would guide us and direct us in our lives from this day forward.

Help us then to be like Thomas. Help us to know that courage in serving you. Help us and grant to us that honesty that is so often absent in our pride and in our self-sufficiency.

But very most especially we pray that with Thomas we would be a worshipping disciple. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.