

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. David Hughes

Problems Christians Face: Thomas - Dealing with doubt

This morning we continue our series on “Problems Christians Face”, by thinking about the subject of doubt. This is a subject that I suspect will be of interest to many people. After all, I don’t suppose there are many Christians who never pass through circumstances that make them ask questions about their faith. But I have to be clear this morning that I’m not a trained psychologist. I can’t explain all the reasons why people doubt. What I plan to do this morning is think with you about someone in the Bible who had doubts and try to explore some of the solutions presented to him.

If I was to ask you to name a Bible character known for their doubts, if you have any answer, I suspect it would be Thomas. “Doubting Thomas” seems to be a nickname that, unfortunately for him, has stuck. What a way to be remembered, as someone whose most noticeable feature was his doubt!

I want us to think about this man Thomas this morning to see what we can learn about doubt.

The incident where Thomas’ doubt has been recorded in the Bible is found in John 20:19-29. The Lord Jesus had been crucified, and rumours of His resurrection were beginning to surface. The Lord had appeared one Sunday to most of His disciples, but for whatever reason, Thomas was not present. Let’s take some time to read the scriptural account. We’ll pick up the story in verse John 20:24: *“Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ So he said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe”* (John 20:24-25)

Arguably, that is Thomas’ most famous statement, *“I will not believe”* (John 20:25). It’s only fair to point out that Thomas wasn’t the only one guilty of doubting the truth of the Lord’s resurrection. Listen to Luke’s account of the meeting a week earlier. *“Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, ‘Peace to you.’ But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. And He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. But while they still did not believe for joy, and marvelled, He said to them, ‘Have you any food here?’ So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence.”* (Luke 24:36-43).

Did you notice? Jesus asked them *“Why do doubts arise in your hearts?”* (Luke 24:38). The other disciples doubted as well. Could it really be true that this was Jesus stood in front of them? Don’t forget, they had just seen Him die only days earlier! Thomas seems to be the one who gets all the flak for his doubts, probably because of his deliberate statement, *“I will not believe”* (John 20:25), but all the other disciples had doubts too.

Before we really start to consider the subject of doubt, I want to pause with you for a minute to ask the question, “Why did God see fit to record the incident of Thomas’ doubt?” For that matter, Why does He so often seem to record in the Bible the failures of His people? Just think for a moment, in the New Testament alone, we’re told about Thomas and his doubts (John 20:19-29), Peter and his denial of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, Luke 22:54-62 and John 18:15-27), Paul and Barnabas and their seeming dispute over Mark (Acts 15:36-41), Mark himself and his disappointing service for a while (see Acts 13:13 and 2 Timothy 4:11). Then there was the time when, in the middle of a storm, the disciples asked the Lord if He really even cared about them and the predicament they were in (Mark 4:35-41). None of these situations paint these characters in their best light, do they?

I think that’s probably the point. The Bible records these incidents to help us realise that even faithful people fail at times. It’s not to say that what they did was OK, so much as to show that even when these people failed there were chances for restoration. How kind God is to record these incidents for our learning. If they hadn’t been recorded, wouldn’t we feel inconsolable every time we failed, every time we doubted, every time we didn’t speak up for the Lord as we should? I think God chose to record these occasions to offer us hope. Of course, it’s right that we feel sorrow over our sinfulness and failings and times when we let the Lord down, but in all circumstances we can remember that God offers hope of restoration and return to Him.

So, if you're listening to the radio this morning and your head seems to be full of doubts at the moment about God and His message, can I point you to the encouragement of God's word? We'll look in a few minutes at some of the specific responses to Thomas' doubt, but for now I'll just say to you, rather than rebuking yourself for feeling doubts, acknowledge them before the Lord and ask Him to give you help!

If you've denied the Lord in the past week, or fallen out with another Christian, don't waste your time beating yourself up over it, or wallowing in grief. Look to the examples of Scripture and come back to the Lord for forgiveness and start to put right things that have gone wrong.

So then, let's return to Thomas. When we left the account in John 20:25, he had just told the other disciples that, unless he saw for himself the wounds on the Lord Jesus, he wouldn't believe. We'll continue reading John's account from John 20:26: *"After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace to you!' Then He said to Thomas, 'Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.' And Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"*

The record of Thomas and his doubts in John 20:19-29 suggests to us two ways to deal with doubts, and also offers a challenge to spur Thomas, and us, on to greater faith. This morning then, I want us to consider these three things from the verses we've read.

1. Seeing Jesus helps remove doubts;
2. Being with believers helps remove doubts; and
3. Jesus calls us to believe, even without seeing.

1. Seeing Jesus helps remove doubts

Let's consider the first point together then; seeing Jesus helps remove doubt. There were the disciples, Thomas included, met together locked away inside a room. Suddenly Jesus appears in the middle of the room and says, *"Peace to you"* (John 20:26). Did you notice that Jesus has something specific to say to Thomas? He invites Thomas to reach out and touch His hands and His side John 20:27. We're not told that Jesus was present when Thomas was so outspoken in his doubts and said *"Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe"* (John 20:25) and yet there Jesus was, offering Thomas the opportunity to do just that.

This reminds us that Jesus knows everything about us. Nothing is hid from Him. He knows what we think and how we feel. We don't need to express our feelings out loud for the Lord to know about them. The Lord Jesus knows our needs. And this incident with Thomas reminds us of how willing Jesus is to minister to our needs. So if you're struggling with doubt, why not tell the Lord about it. Perhaps He will encourage you, not in the same way as He did with Thomas, but in a way just suited to your own situation.

There is no recording in John's gospel of Thomas actually reaching out and touching Jesus' wounds. It seems as if simply the sight of the risen Jesus, and the sight of His wounds was sufficient for Thomas to repent of his doubt and say, *"My Lord and my God"* (John 20:28). Less than one week previously, he had been so obstinate in his doubts, but at the sight of Jesus, all the doubt was removed and he could do nothing but acknowledge that Jesus was His Lord and His God.

Perhaps this is a reminder for us that a vision of the risen Jesus is so crucial for us in avoiding doubt. Now, I'm not talking about anything strange or unusual this morning. I'm not talking about visions or hallucinations or anything like that. I know that we can't see Jesus today in the same way that Thomas and the disciples did in that room after the resurrection, but I still suggest to you this morning that seeing Jesus will help us remove doubt. You see, although we can't see Jesus with our eyes, physically, we do have recorded for us in the Bible an image of who Jesus was and what He had done. Think on that and I believe it will give us some help in our own lives as we battle against doubts.

How did it work for Thomas? What was it that so changed his mind? Let's explore that point a bit further. Looking at Jesus would have reminded Thomas that Jesus had died for Him. There on the Lord's hands and side were the wounds endured just days before on the cross. There was the physical evidence of His crucifixion. Right in front of Thomas' eyes was very real proof that Jesus had died for him. That is the wonderful truth of the Bible. Paul expresses it so clearly and simply in 1 Corinthians 15:3 *"Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures."*

The sight of the risen Jesus would remind Thomas how much he was loved by the Lord. Those wounds in the Lord's hands and side were endured whilst Jesus was dying for Thomas. Surely that must have meant something to Thomas on that Sunday so long ago? The Lord really must have loved Thomas to go through all the horrors of crucifixion to

save him. Of course, this only tells half the story since the main horror of the cross was not the wounds endured at the hands of the Roman soldiers, but the sufferings of the Lord as He bore our sin and, to use the language of 2 Corinthians 5:21, He was *“made sin for us.”* There are depths to the Lord’s sufferings we will never be able to grasp, but the little we can understand surely points to the fact that the Lord loves us. Why else would He endure the cross?

Friends, this morning, do you realise that Jesus loves you? Thomas was reminded of this fact as the Lord stood before Him, bearing the marks of the cross, on a Sunday many years ago. Do you realise the same glorious truth more than 2,000 years later?

Think about this some more. The risen Jesus, standing in front of Thomas would remind Him that Jesus was alive. Thomas knew that Jesus had been dead just days earlier, but there He was, standing in the same room as Thomas. No doubt about the fact that He had been dead, but equally no doubt about the fact that Jesus was alive! That’s a key truth of the Bible. Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again. He is alive now! What’s the significance of that? Well, it teaches us that sin has been fully dealt with. No need to question if God has fully dealt with our sins. Why? Because Jesus died for them, and having done so rose again from the dead. The risen Jesus standing in front of Thomas gave hope of new life, and forgiveness with God. Is that hope yours this morning?

The risen Jesus, bearing all the marks of the crucifixion reminds us that sin has been dealt with, the judgement has been borne, the cost has been met, and new life has been offered to us. The risen Jesus, bearing all the marks of the crucifixion, offers to all those who have faith in Him, and look to Him alone for salvation, the removal of fear, the promise of acceptance in His family, and forgiveness for our sins.

As you are listening to the broadcast this morning, can I reemphasise that seeing Jesus helps remove doubt. I know we can’t see Jesus in the same way that Thomas did, but can I encourage us all this morning to spend time reading what the Bible has to say about Jesus. In particular read about the crucifixion in the Gospels, and read how the epistles explain the significance of the Lord’s death. Perhaps, like it was for Thomas, this sight of the wounds of the cross, will remind you of how much the Lord cares for you and will remove some of your doubts.

2. Being with believers helps remove doubts

Let’s move on to our second point about doubt; being with believers helps remove doubt. I need to be clear and say that this is not the main point of this passage. It seems clear to me, that the thing that moved Thomas the most was the sight of the Lord Jesus. But I think the point is still valid. Think about it. If Thomas had been with the disciples the week before, he would have had no need for doubts as he would have seen the Lord Jesus with his own eyes. A whole week of sadness and doubt could have been avoided. It makes me wonder how much I miss out on if I don’t gather with Christians each week when the church gathers.

It wasn’t just seeing the Lord Jesus that Thomas missed out on by being absent the first time. Let’s go backwards in John 20 for a few minutes to notice what happened at the first appearing of the Lord to the disciples. We’ll read John 20:19-22. *“Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”*

When the Lord appeared to the disciples the first time, He said *“Peace be with you”* (John 20:19) and after they had seen His wounds, John records that the disciples were glad (John 20:20). They experienced peace as they began to appreciate the significance of the Lord’s death and resurrection. Thomas missed out on that first time round. As we miss opportunities to gather with the Lord’s people, we might miss a fresh appreciation of the greatness of salvation.

In addition to this, the disciples received a commission (John 20:21-22). They were sent by the Lord. How gracious of Him to give His disciples chance to serve Him. Thomas missed those opportunities as he wasn’t there to receive the commission. I wonder if we miss similar opportunities to serve the Lord when we aren’t able to meet with the Lord’s people?

Did you notice the encouragement the Lord gives at the end John 20:22? He says *“Receive the Holy Spirit”*. The Lord was about to return to heaven, but He wasn’t going to leave His disciples alone. He had just given them a service to perform but He wouldn’t leave them ill-equipped for their task. No, He would leave the Holy Spirit to guide them and to comfort them. It’s a glorious truth of the Bible that this same promise is given to us. Thomas was unaware of this promise, as he hadn’t been with the disciples to hear about it the first time.

Of course, I’m not saying that it’s always wrong to miss gathering with the church. There may be circumstances where we’re not able to get out to church meetings, and the Lord understands that. Please don’t take anything I’ve just been

saying as a criticism of those who would dearly love to be gathered with the Lord's people but are unable to for some reason. Equally, it's obviously true that there are opportunities for service, and opportunities to receive teaching outside of the church. This radio programme is one such example. But I think the point remains true, that as often as we are able to, we are wise to meet with God's people. This will be far more help to us than an internet blog or radio station, no matter how good the preaching on the radio or how big the problems in the church. If there is anyone listening to the broadcast today, who is still unsure about whether or not to go to church this morning, can I encourage you to do so. You never know, the Lord might just speak to you and encourage you in some special way, just like He did to Thomas, when he was met with the disciples the second time around.

So then, we've considered two things that might help us when doubts arise. The first was to look at what the Bible teaches us about Jesus, and in particular, His death and resurrection. The second was to spend time in the presence of other believers. Both of these things would be good to develop as habits in our lives.

3. Jesus calls us to believe, even without seeing

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He does show Thomas His hands and His side. He does meet Thomas where he is and deal with the doubts He knows Thomas is experiencing. But He doesn't leave it there. Look at what He says in John 20:27, *"Do not be unbelieving but believing."* Look again at what Jesus says to Thomas in John 20:29, *"Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

You see, although the Lord Jesus knew about Thomas' doubts and helped him overcome them, He does challenge Thomas to a greater kind of faith. He didn't just stop at revealing Himself to Thomas so that he would know He was alive. He tells Thomas it would be better not to be unbelieving anymore. Instead, Thomas is told to believe. In fact, Jesus goes further and says that Thomas should believe even without seeing. The Lord wouldn't always be there in person to allay Thomas' doubts. What would he do in the Lord's absence? He was to believe even without seeing.

I think that is an important lesson for us all this morning. We've been very clear that we may doubt sometimes, and the Lord doesn't rebuke us for that. But I want us to be equally clear that the Lord doesn't want us to stay in that state. He doesn't want us to be forever doubters and always in need of reassurance. Instead, He wants us to grow in our faith and in our knowledge of Him. He wants our faith to become stronger so that we believe even when we don't see.

Of course it's a wonderful truth that the Lord is compassionate towards us in the weakness of our faith and provides us with encouragements to overcome our doubts. But let's not miss the challenge of this passage in John's Gospel where the Lord challenges us to an increasing faith and to believe without seeing. Peter records that it's a mark of the genuineness of our faith that we rejoice in trials and allow our circumstances to bring glory to Jesus Christ even though we haven't seen Him. Listen to the words of 1 Peter 1:6-9. *"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith - the salvation of your souls."*

Is that description true of us? Do we love the Lord Jesus, even though we haven't seen Him? Does our appreciation of Him, even though it has not been obtained by physical sight, make us rejoice with joy inexpressible? May the Lord help us to display that kind of faith to the world around us.

Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that they need to *"walk by faith and not by sight"* (2 Corinthians 5:7). That's a good reminder for us today. If we are believers, we are to live our lives by faith in Christ.

So then, as to doubt, we've seen today that even people close to the Lord sometimes doubt. And the Lord is kind and compassionate towards those who do doubt. We've seen that a good antidote for doubt is to spend time thinking about the Lord Jesus and His death and resurrection. We've also spoken about the benefits of regularly meeting with other Christians. But we've seen at the end that Jesus calls us to something more than a weak doubting faith, but instead to a strong, vibrant, living faith that is not based on sight.

May the Lord help us as we try to live out the words of the apostle Paul in Galatians 2:20: *"the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."*

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