Section III - The Doubt of Thomas  
John 20:24-29

“Thomas, one of the Twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came” on that first Christian Sabbath evening and showed Himself to His disciples (Jn. 20:24). One hopes he had a good reason for being absent. But it is at least possible that he did not. Having a melancholy temperament, he might have been simply nurturing his wounds of sadness by being alone. This is not unusual. Even now, some people whose Christ is dead spend their Sabbaths at home or in solitude while avoiding corporate worship which, for them, can be either offensively cheerful or boring. Whatever the reason, Thomas missed a good sermon. It is the only one, as far as we know, in the entire ministry of our Lord, in which He formally explained the Messianic doctrine as found in the Old Testament. If only Thomas had known that such a discourse was going to be delivered that night! But one never knows when good things will come. The only way to make sure we will receive them is by always being where we ought to be and doing what we ought to be doing.

The same melancholy temperament that probably caused Thomas to be absent when Christ first met with His disciples after He rose from the dead also made him more skeptical than the others over the news of the resurrection. When the other disciples told him they had just seen the Lord, he replied with vehemence, “Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (verse 25). He would not be satisfied with the testimony of his brothers. He must have credible evidence for himself - not that he doubted their truthfulness. But he could not get rid of the suspicion that what they said they had seen was only a ghost. He felt their eyes had been deceived.

Thomas’ skepticism was, we think, mainly an issue of temperament. It had very little in common with the doubts that some people have who tend to be rationalistic, who are constantly challenging everything that is supernatural, and who have problems with anything that even hints of being miraculous. For years, people have been calling Thomas the Rationalist. It has even been suggested that he belonged to the sect of the Sadducees before he joined Jesus and His men. However, when we maturely examine the issue, we are compelled to say that we do not see any strong basis for this perspective. Nevertheless, we certainly do not blame modern doubters who may derive some degree of comfort from their position. We are very much aware that there are sincere and even spiritually-minded people who find it very difficult to believe in the supernatural and the miraculous. In fact, for some, it is extremely difficult. It is even
questionable that if they had been in Thomas’ shoes and had been able to freely handle and carefully inspect the wounds in the risen Savior’s body, that they would have been able to have an unhesitating faith in the reality of the resurrection. We do not believe that there is any reason à priori (theoretically) for maintaining that no disciple of Jesus could have been a person with such a temperament. All we are saying is that there is no evidence that Thomas was a man who was cut out of this mold. There are no facts to support it. Nowhere in the gospel history do we discover any unwillingness on his part to believe in the supernatural or the miraculous per se. We do not find, for example, that he was skeptical about the raising of Lazarus. We are only told that when Jesus suggested they visit the afflicted family in Bethany, Thomas thought the journey would be dangerous to his beloved Master and to them as well. He said, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him” (Jn. 11:16). At that time, he demonstrated that he was not so much a Rationalist as a man with a gloomy temperament. He was prone to look on the dark side of things, living in the pensive moonlight instead of the cheerful sunlight. His doubt did not spring out of his system of thought but out of his emotional makeup.

There is something else we must say about the doubt of this disciple. It did not come from an unwillingness to believe. Rather, it was the doubt of a sad man. The event he doubted (the resurrection) was one in which he would have welcomed the news that it was true. Nothing could have given Thomas any greater joy than to be assured that his Master was indeed risen. This is readily apparent from his outbreak of joy when he was finally satisfied: “My Lord and my God!” (vs. 28). This is not an exclamation from someone who is forced to reluctantly admit some fact that he would rather deny. It is common for people who have never had any doubts themselves to blame all doubt on bad motives and denounce it indiscriminately as a crime. Now, unquestionably, far too many doubt because of bad motives. They do not want to believe - and can’t afford to. Many deny the teaching that there will be a resurrection of the dead because, for them, it would be a resurrection to shame and eternal contempt. But this is by no means true of them all. Some doubt who really want to believe. In fact, their doubt is due to their excessive anxiety to believe. They are so eager to know the truth and feel so deeply the immense importance of the issues at stake, that they cannot take anything for granted. For some period of time, their hands tremble so much that they cannot grasp hold of the great tenets of faith such as a living God, an incarnate, crucified, risen Savior, and a glorious eternal future. This kind of doubt is limited to sincere, thoughtful, and pure-hearted people. It is vastly different from the doubt of those who are frivolous, worldly, and vicious. The “good” kind of doubt is holy and noble, not vile and unholy. We may not praise it, but we ought not to harshly condemn and exclude it from the circle of Christian compassion. This kind of doubt is, at worst, only an infirmity which always ends in strong, unwavering faith.

Jesus thought Thomas’ doubt was like this. We infer this from the way in which He dealt with it. As we said, Thomas was absent when Jesus first appeared to the disciples. But the risen Lord
makes a second appearance for his special benefit and offers him the proof he needed. Once
the greetings are over, He turns immediately to the Doubter and addresses him in terms that
are designed to remind him of his statement to his brothers, saying, “Reach here your finger
and see My hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into My side; and be not unbelieving,
but believe” (vs. 27). There may be something of a rebuke here, but there is more compassion
than anything else. Jesus speaks to a sincere disciple whose faith is weak and not to one who
has an evil heart that is filled with unbelief. When other people who only wanted an excuse for
not believing demanded evidence from Jesus, He addressed them in a very different way. “This
generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign shall be given to it but the
sign of Jonah” (Lk. 11:29). This is what He said in these situations.

**Thomas’ Faith**
Having determined the nature of Thomas’ doubt, let us now look at his faith.
The melancholy disciple’s doubts were soon removed. But how? Did Thomas make use of the
means he was offered for ascertaining the reality of his Lord’s resurrection? In other words, did
he actually put his fingers and hand into the nail and spear wounds? Opinions differ on this
point. We think it is probable that he did not. Several things cause us to favor this position. First,
the narrative seems to leave no room for the process of investigation. Thomas answers Jesus’
proposal by what appears to be an immediate profession of faith. The way the profession is made
is not what we would expect from someone who had examined His body. “My Lord and my
God!” is the warm, passionate language of a man who has undergone some sudden change in
his heart, not the words of a man who has just concluded a scientific experiment. Furthermore,
we observe that there is no allusion to such an inspection when Jesus makes a comment about
Thomas’ faith. The disciple is said to believe because he *saw* the wounds, not because he *handled*
them. Finally, the idea that Thomas would actually go through the process that Jesus proposed
is inconsistent with his character. He was not one of your calm, cold-blooded men who conduct
investigations into truth with the passionless impartiality of a judge. He would not have exam-
ined the wounds in the risen Savior’s body with the coolness of an anatomist who dissects dead
carcasses. No. He was a man with a passionate, poetic temperament, strong in his belief and his
unbelief, and moved to faith or doubt by the feelings of his heart rather than through the reason-
ing powers of his mind.

We imagine the truth about Thomas went something like this. Eight days before his encounter
with Jesus, when he made the threat to his fellow disciples, he did not deliberately mean all that
he said. It was just an off-the-cuff comment from a melancholy man who was feeling dejected
and miserable. “Jesus risen? It is impossible, and that’s all there is to it. I won’t believe unless I
do so and so. I don’t know if I will believe when all is said and done.” But eight days have passed
and, behold, there is Jesus in their midst. Now He is visible, not only to Thomas, but to all of His
disciples. Will Thomas still insist on going through with his rigorous test? No! No! His doubts
vanish as soon as he sees Jesus, like the morning dew at sunrise. Even before the Risen One has revealed His wounds and spoken those somewhat rebuking, yet kind and sympathetic words, Thomas is virtually a believer (by the way, Jesus’ words prove that He had an intimate knowledge of everything that had been going on in Thomas’ mind). And after he has seen the ugly wounds and heard Jesus’ kind words, he is ashamed of his rash, reckless speech to his brothers. Overcome with joy and tears, he exclaims, “My Lord and my God!”

It was a noble confession of faith. In fact, it was the most advanced confession that had ever been made by any of the Twelve during the time they had been with Jesus. The last is first. The greatest Doubter comes to the fullest and strongest belief. This has often happened in the history of the Church. Richard Baxter (1615-1691) indicates that it was his own experience and says that nothing is so firmly believed as that which has at one time been doubted. Many Thomases have said, or could say, the same thing about themselves. The doubters have eventually become the soundest and even the warmest believers. Doubt by itself is a cold thing. In the case of Thomas, it often speaks harsh and heartless words. This should not surprise us. For when the mind doubts, the soul is in darkness. And during the chilly night, the heart becomes frozen. But when the daylight of faith comes, the frost melts, and hearts that once seemed hard and stony prove to be capable of demonstrating an abundance of enthusiasm and strong devotion.

Socinians, whose doctrine is totally undermined by Thomas’ confession when it is naturally interpreted, tell us that the words, “My Lord and my God” do not refer to Jesus at all but to the Deity in heaven. They say his words are only an expression of his astonishment when he discovered that what he had doubted had really come to pass. He lifts up his eyes and his hands to heaven, as it were, and exclaims, “My Lord and my God! It is a fact. The crucified Jesus is restored to life again.” This interpretation is absolutely desperate. It disregards the text itself. When Thomas spoke these words, he was answering and speaking to Jesus. Their interpretation also forces a man who is bursting with emotion to speak coldly. For though the expression “my God” might have been an appropriate phrase by which to indicate astonishment, the two phrases, “My Lord and my God,” are too weak and unnatural to accomplish that purpose.

**The Meaning of Thomas’ Profession**

Therefore, we do not have a mere expression of surprise here. We have a profession of faith that was completely appropriate for the man and the circumstances. It is as pregnant with meaning as it is brief and compelling. Thomas immediately declares his acceptance of a miraculous fact and his belief in a very significant doctrine. In the first part of his response to Jesus, he recognizes that the One who was dead is now alive: “My Lord, my beloved Master! It is He, the very same person with whom we enjoyed such wonderful fellowship before He was crucified.” In the second part, he acknowledges Christ’s divinity. If not for the first time, at least now it was done with intelligence and an emphasis that was new in every way. From the *fact* of the resurrection
he moves on to the doctrine: “My Lord is risen. Yes! Therefore, He is my God. For that One is divine over whom death does not have any power.” The doctrine also helps supply the fact of the resurrection with an additional certainty. For if Christ is God, death could not have any power over Him, and His resurrection naturally followed. Once Thomas concluded with his majestic affirmation, “My God,” he made a transition. When he demanded the physical evidence, He had been standing on a low platform of faith. Now he has moved to the higher platform where he feels this kind of evidence is unnecessary.

**Believing Without Seeing**

Finally, we need to focus on the remark the Lord made about the faith just professed by His disciple. “Jesus said to him, ‘Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed’” (Jn. 20:29).

These words on the blessedness of those who believe without seeing is really concerned about the future, even though they are expressed in the past tense. The situation Jesus referred to would also be true for every believer who lived after the apostolic age. Since then, no one has seen Him, and no one today can believe in Him because he has seen Jesus physically, like the Apostles did. They saw so that we might be able to believe - without seeing - by trusting their testimony.

But what does Jesus mean when he pronounces a beatitude or blessing on those who do not see and yet believe?

He does not intend to commend those who believe without making any inquiry. It is one thing to believe without seeing; it is another thing to believe without consideration. To believe without seeing means that a person can be satisfied with something less than an absolute demonstration or to have such a powerful inward illumination that it makes external evidences unnecessary. We need this kind of faith. For if faith were only possible to those who could see with their physical eyes, belief in Christianity could not extend beyond the apostolic age. But to believe without consideration is a different matter altogether. This means the person does not care whether the thing that is to be believed is true or false. There is no benefit in that. This kind of faith has its origin in everything that is corrupt in mankind - their ignorance, slothfulness, and spiritual indifference. It cannot bring any blessing to those who possess it. Even if the truths are made to seem so high, holy, and blessed, what good can a faith do that accepts them simply without any investigation or without even so much as knowing what the truths that are believed mean?

The Lord Jesus, then, does not bestow a blessing on believing without considering the evidence. Neither does He mean to say that all the joy goes to those who have never doubted like Thomas did. This is just not true. Those who do not have trouble believing certainly enjoy a blessedness that is all their own. They escape the torment of uncertainty, and the current of their spiritual life
flows along very smoothly. But those who have doubted, and finally believe, also have their peculiar joys. No stranger can experience their joy. The joy they experience comes from the fact that what was dead is alive again, and that which was lost is found. Theirs is the elation that Thomas experienced when he exclaimed, “My Lord and my God,” when he really thought Jesus was gone forever. Theirs is the bliss of someone who has dived into a deep sea and brought up a pearl of great price. Theirs is the comfort of having their former doubts used for growing their faith. Every doubt becomes a stone in the hidden foundation on which the superstructure of their creed is built. The distresses over their faith are converted into confirmations. To illustrate, when the agitations in the motions of the planets were discovered, people thought it would throw doubt on Newton’s theory of gravitation. Further research, however, confirmed his theory.

What, then, does the Lord Jesus mean by these words? Simply this: He wants those who must believe without seeing to understand that they do not have any reason to envy those who had an opportunity to see and then believed only after they saw. Those of us who live today, far from the original events, are very prone to imagine that we have been placed at a great disadvantage when compared with Jesus’ disciples. In some respects we are. Faith is more difficult for us than for them. But then we must not forget that to the degree that faith is difficult, it is more noble and precious to the heart. It is a greater accomplishment to be able to believe without seeing than to believe because we have seen. And if it takes more effort, the trial of faith only enhances its value. Furthermore, we must remember that we never reach the full blessedness of faith until what we believe shines in the light of its own self-evidence. Do you think the disciples were happy men just because they had seen their risen Lord and believed? They were much happier when they received clear insight into the whole mystery of redemption. They felt the proof of this or that specific fact or doctrine was unnecessary.

Jesus wanted His doubting disciple to have joy. By contrasting Thomas’ situation with those who believe without seeing, He lets us know that joy is attainable for us as well. We, too, may attain the blessedness of a faith that has been raised above all doubt by its own clear insight into divine truth. If we are faithful, we may rise to this blessedness from very humble beginnings. We may begin, in our weakness, by being Thomases, clinging eagerly to every piece of external evidence in order to save ourselves from drowning. But, as we grow, we can end up with a faith that almost amounts to sight, rejoicing in Jesus as our Lord and God, with joy unspeakable and full of glory.