

FROM DOUBT TO DEDICATION

John 20:24-28

Neither of the first three Gospels tells us anything whatever about Thomas, beyond the mere announcement of his name as "one of the Twelve." We are indebted to the Gospel of John for the few but interesting facts about Thomas, who stands out as one of the Master's men, with distinct and impressive qualities of his own. Frequently, when we really get to know people, we think of them quite differently than we did before. This is exactly what happens when we really get to know Thomas.

The three incidents recorded by John, in which Thomas stands out as a clearly defined and vivid character, occurred within a period of a few months towards the close of Christ's earthly ministry. This brief record is far from constituting anything like a biography.

John's first reference to Thomas is in the eleventh chapter, in connection with the illness of Lazarus and the events connected therewith. Word had been sent to Christ that Lazarus was ill, but for two days the Lord Jesus had delayed going to Bethany or doing anything toward restoring the health of His friend. After Lazarus had died, Christ so informed the apostle and then added, "And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him." Inasmuch as Lazarus had already died, for Christ to talk about going to Bethany at that time not only seemed to them to be a suicidal act of recklessness, but one of uselessness also. To venture into Judea seemed to them to be equivalent to rushing into certain destruction, in view of the threats of the authorities against Christ. When He suggested that they go to Bethany, they were on the verge of forsaking their Lord.

Like the rest of the apostles, Thomas anticipated the very worst from such a venture. He could not see anything but death as the inevitable end of the journey. Discerning the realities of the situation, because of his love for the Lord, Thomas was determined to go along with Him. He could not see anything but disaster ahead, but to him that was no reason for turning back. For Thomas there might be death, but there could not be any disloyalty to Christ. He declared his loyalty to Christ and his willingness to die for Him, if necessary. If his Lord was going to Bethany, Thomas could not be deterred, even by the possibility of death, from going with Him. If his Lord's life was to end, then why should Thomas live on without Him? So, Thomas said to his fellow apostles, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

At first glance this response of Thomas might appear to reveal an excessive pessimism. Many have drawn this conclusion and have considered him a melancholiac. It is easy to confuse a realist with a melancholiac, for both see the difficulties in a situation. The realist sees the hazards in a dangerous position, yet he is able to think and to act effectively. The melancholiac broods over imaginary evils, is gripped by excessive fear of peril, and is so paralyzed by real danger that he is unable to act. Thomas did not show any of the weaknesses of a melancholiac. He was a realist who saw danger clearly, yet immediately proposed the action which the situation demanded. Stepping forward, he said to the other apostles, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

How many church members today would say, "I am willing to go and die with Him"? Thomas was ready to die with Christ, but many today who call themselves Christians are not even willing to live for Him, except in very restricted areas of their lives. They may go to church occasionally, but they refuse to let Christ have anything to

do with their business or pleasure. Some of them will tell you in so many words, "I never let religion interfere with my private life." Because of his love for Christ and devotion to Him, Thomas was willing to die with Him.

John's second reference to Thomas is in the fourteenth chapter of his Gospel. Here we find our Lord with His apostles in the upper room in Jerusalem on the night before His crucifixion. Christ was telling them that He was going to die.

In trying to get them to see beyond the cross, with a soft and tender voice Christ said, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know."

They did not know what Christ meant by those words. Unable to live with an unasked question or to contain himself any longer, normally silent Thomas said, "Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?" Happy to satisfy a mind that was yearning for the truth, Christ said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." In response to his question "whither" the reply was "to the Father." In answer to his question about "the way" the response was "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." Thus our Lord always meets the needs of His own.

The third reference to Thomas in the Gospel of John is in the twentieth chapter. After the death of Christ, it seemed that the greatest desire of Thomas was to be alone. He left the other apostles and sought comfort in the solitude of his own spirit. Thomas was so dejected that he did not care to attend the meeting of the apostles when they assembled on Sunday evening in the upper room for meditation, prayer and devotion.

It was with heavy but resolute hearts that this group had assembled in that place made sacred by many memories, but Thomas was not with them. It was in that same upper room that Christ had met with them, talked to them about His approaching death, the meaning of His sacrifice, the deathlessness of His love and the certainty of His triumph. It was there He had drawn aside the veil and given them a glimpse into the future, and the reality of life in the Father's house.

While the apostles were assembled in that place of hallowed memories and mourning the death of their Master, Christ came and stood in their midst and greeted them with the words of the familiar salutation, "Peace be unto you." Not only did He speak to them, but "he shewed unto them his hands and his side," as evidence that He Who was present with them was the same One Who had been laid low in death for them. It is not surprising, therefore, that when He spoke thus to them that it is said, "Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord."

But, sad to say, Thomas "was not with them when Jesus came." No reason was given for his absence, but he was not there. He should have been present because he was one of the Twelve whom Christ had chosen to be with Him. Those who occupy positions of responsibility and leadership ought to be in their respective places. It is a sad day when church members can be counted on to be at social functions and at their places of business, but absent themselves from the services at the Lord's house.

Why was Thomas absent when he should have been present to receive the inspiration and the uplift which were available through this service? He did not have any more to do than those who were present. He was not absent because he had found satisfaction elsewhere. Instead of being satisfied and happy, he was sad and miserable.

He was absent because he had lost hope. He believed that Christ was dead, and that consequently right was defeated and wrong was enthroned forever. Thomas was not present because he did not expect the Lord Jesus to be there. If he had even dreamed that the Lord was going to be present, he would have been there also.

Why is it that Christians so frequently absent themselves from church services today? They offer various excuses such as being tired, not feeling very well, unfavorable weather, unexpected callers, and the only day they have to do something else. The fact is, it is the only day they do not have to do something else because it is the Lord's day. As a rule, when they absent themselves, it is simply because they do not want to be present. Love for Christ will bring anybody to the worship services, if physically able to be there.

What did Thomas miss by being absent?

1. Fellowship with Christ.

Thomas missed the fellowship that he might have had with Christ, and which the others enjoyed immensely.

2. Fellowship with his brethren.

The other ten apostles had sweet fellowship together, but Thomas missed this. There is no fellowship like that of Christ's followers. In a congregation there are people from various walks of life, but they are one in their love for Christ.

3. The thrill of great joy.

"Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord." This joy would have been experienced by Thomas if he had only been there. Instead, he was discouraged and melancholy. He actually became a doubter.

4. The gift of peace.

To those who were present Christ said, "Peace be unto you." How Thomas needed that peace!

5. The commission to a great service.

Christ said unto them, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." But Thomas was not present to hear that commission. Our Lord does not have any task to give to any individual who does not have time for worship and who is out of fellowship with Him.

6. A promise of success in His work.

Christ said to them, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosesoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

7. The privilege of helping his fellow apostles.

His vacant seat was a damper to their spirits. He might have been a great encouragement to them.

The absence of Thomas when our Lord appeared to the other apostles illustrates the fact that many blessings are missed by those who "forsake the assembling of themselves together."

When the apostles came to tell Thomas that they had seen and talked with Christ after His resurrection, Thomas was sure that they were the victims of an hallucination. He could not believe that the One Whom he had seen crucified on Friday could have been alive on the Sunday following. To him it was beyond all reason. He utterly refused to believe them. He said that he would not believe them unless he actually saw and felt the nailprints in Christ's hands and the gash of the spear in His side. He simply would not concede Christ's victory over death. He had to be shown.

The world has a way of forgetting the good things in a man's life. It often judges him by one glaring mistake. This is what happened to Thomas. He is still universally labeled as "Doubting Thomas." There were many instances of his great faith, but he is remembered because of his doubt.

In January 1929 California Institute of Technology was playing against Georgia Tech in the Rose Bowl football game. In the opening seconds, Georgia Tech received the ball. The player was hit hard by tacklers from California; so hard, in fact, that the ball squirted out of his arms, and right into the outstretched hands of the California center named Roy Riegels.

Riegels started down the field. As three Tech players came at him, he reversed his field. Then he cut the other way and circled. Suddenly he saw the opening he had been seeking and went for pay dirt. Yard after yard flew by.

The fans were screaming, for Riegels was running in the wrong direction. He covered sixty-three yards before he was finally brought down by one of his own team-mates. Riegel's blunder set up Georgia Tech and won the game for them.

Riegels was never allowed to forget his blunder. He is still remembered as the man who ran the wrong way. Through the years and to this day he has been known and referred to as "Wrong Way" Riegels. That tag will always remain around his neck. People have forgotten the hundreds of times he ran the right way. It just seems to be our nature to overlook the good and cling to the bad. So it was with Thomas, in spite of his wonderful qualities, for most people he has always been "Doubting Thomas."

Eight days after Thomas had expressed his doubts about the resurrection of Christ, our Lord appeared to the apostles again in the upper room, and this time Thomas was with them. After the Lord stood in their midst and said, "Peace be unto you," He told Thomas to put his finger in the nailprints in His hands, and to place his hand in the gash which the spear had cut in His side. Thomas had been demanding evidence and here was plenty of it.

When Thomas did as Christ commanded him, he was thoroughly convinced that He was the risen Lord, so he was so overwhelmed that he enthusiastically gave expression to the greatest confession in Christian history, "My Lord and my God!" Then Christ said, "Thomas, because thou hast seen me thou hast believed: blessed are they which have not seen, and yet have believed." Won't you believe on Christ as your Saviour and confess Him as your Lord now, while we sing the invitation song?