

Thomas, the Believer

Rabbi Jochanan ben Saccai was for two years the president of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. He served immediately before and after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. He presided over his nation when Israel was in her death throes. The Talmud tells of an incident that happened as he lay dying. His disciples came to visit him. When they came in to his chambers and saw him on his deathbed, he burst into tears. His tears astonished them. Why they asked, did he whom they called the light of Israel, the right pillar of the Temple, and its mighty hammer—why did he betray such signs of fear?

He replied, "If I were now to be brought before an earthly king, who lives today and dies tomorrow, whose wrath and whose bonds are not everlasting, and whose sentence of death, even, is not that of eternal death, who can be assuaged by arguments, or perhaps bought off by money—I should tremble and weep. How much more reason have I for it when about to be led before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, Who lives and abides forever, Whose chains are chains ever more, and whose sentence of death kills forever, whom I cannot assuage with words, nor bribe with money! And not only so, but there are before me two ways, one to paradise, and the other to hell, and I know not which of the two ways I shall have to go—whether to paradise or to hell. How, then, shall I not shed tears?"¹

There are many kinds of doubt: there is uncertainty; there is the want of conviction, sometimes perplexity to the point of despair, but "doubt" as it was frequently used by the Greeks of the First Century meant to be without a way.²

¹Edersheim, A. (2003). *Sketches of Jewish social life in the days of Christ*. (161).

² ἀπορέω, always used in the Middle Voice, lit. means to be without a way. Vine.

Some men live to see their doubts erased by their experiences; others carry their doubts to their graves. The latter never knowing the way they shall go into eternity.

Thomas the Apostle has been called a doubter. And he was. He was probably born in Galilee, but there is doubt about the place of his birth. Tradition says he died in Madras, India in A.D. 53, but that is not certain. His name in Aramaic was Te'oma—in Greek, Didymus. The name meant "twin."³

His full name was Judas Thomas, Judas the Twin. Perhaps he had a brother. What we know of him are only a few facts: We know that he lived during the time of John the Baptist, that he was Jew, and that he became the disciple of Jesus.

In those days, a Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, ruled Judaea. Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee, and Peraea. Hard times buffeted the Jews, and their lives hung as if on a thread.

There was plenty of reason for doubt. Doubts and fears have a way about them. They arise at inconvenient times. When they come—the way ahead becomes dim. A man hesitates; he becomes uncertain.

Jesus did not hesitate. He chose twelve men, and sent them to preach that the "...kingdom of heaven is at hand."⁴

The Twelve were men of ordinary occupations. Many were fishermen. One was a tax-gatherer. All were witnesses. Good eyes and ears were better qualifications for the original Apostles than all the learning of a university doctor. Their most important role was to identify the person of Jesus, whenever they saw him. Jesus expected them to tell what he did, to repeat what he said, and to proclaim the facts without comment. Common, unlettered men fulfilled this role better than scholars—unless they doubted.

Thomas doubted.

Who was Thomas the Apostle? All we know of the Apostle Thomas comes to us from the Gospel John. This amounts to

³ Wood, D. R. W. (1996, c1982, c1962). *New Bible Dictionary* (1183).

⁴ Matthew 4:17; 10:7.

three traits. (1) He was a man slow to believe—he saw all the difficulties of a case. (2) He was subject to despondency, seeing things on the darker side. (3) He loved Jesus.

Why would Jesus choose such a man? What reason did He have? For surely there was a reason.

During the days that Herod Antipas ruled Galilee the Jews expected the Messiah to appear. They hoped the great Prince of the chosen people would come, and relieve them of their burdens. The Jews expected an earthly king in the mold of David who would overthrow their enemies and usher in a golden age. When the hope dragged on, a groaning took hold of the spirit of the Jews. Some despaired. Others allowed their afflictions under the Romans to goad them to rebellion, and they looked to every zealot leader as, perhaps, the one.

The Apostles expected a temporal prince, at first. When Jesus began to heal the sick, restore sight to the blind, and to feed the thousands with a word, the expectations of the Apostles soared.

On one occasion when the enemies of Jesus attempted to seize him, Jesus left Jerusalem and crossed to the other side of the Jordan River. He stayed at a place where John the Baptist had first baptized his disciples. Word came to Jesus from Bethany that Lazarus, his friend, was sick.

Jesus delayed going to Lazarus, and Lazarus died.

John, in his Gospel, says that Jesus told his disciples that,

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go that I may awaken him out of sleep.'

The disciples therefore said to Him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.'

Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.'

Thomas therefore, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with Him.'" John 11:11-16.

Thomas saw the danger that Jesus faced if he returned to a town so near the center of his enemies. Yet he was devoted to Christ and was not deterred.

Bethany lay slightly less than two miles from Jerusalem. It was situated on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, fully a mile beyond the summit, and not far from where the road to Jericho begins the descent to the Jordan valley.

The Jews had threatened to kill Jesus, and now Jesus was about to go to their center of power. Yet, loyalty compelled Thomas to accept the same fate. But in his statement we can also see his despondency, the sense of defeat. He did not expect Jesus to succeed.

When Jesus and the Apostles reached Bethany many of the Jews had gathered to console the two sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Martha said to Jesus,

"Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.

Jesus said to her, 'Your brother shall rise again.'

Martha said to Him, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'

Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?'" John 11:21-26.

Thomas must have known what Jesus said to Martha. It would be strange consolation offered by one who the Apostle thought to be in danger of death at any moment. The words would perplex a man who harbored doubts of the kind that burdened Thomas. Still, the words Jesus spoke to them before they returned from beyond Jordan could have echoed in his thoughts, "...that you may believe...let us go to him."

Certainly, Thomas would have been surprised by what happened next. Jesus asked where they had buried Lazarus.

They led him to the tomb, a cave, where a stone was lying against the opening.

"Jesus said, 'Remove the stone.'

Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, 'Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.'

Jesus said to her, 'Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?' John 11:39-40.

And so they removed the stone. And Jesus raised His eyes, and said,

'Father, I thank Thee that Thou hearest Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always; but because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that Thou didst send Me.'

And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.'

He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.' John 11:41-44.

So stunning a miracle was the raising of Lazarus of Bethany from the dead that it converted many of the Jews who stood watching and shook the foundations of the political authority in Jerusalem.

But what of Thomas? He was there. What would he have thought? He saw Jesus raise a man from the dead, a man who had been dead four days, a man whose body had already begun to decay. The Lord answered in a stroke all his hopes, all his fears. Thomas had come to Bethany to die with Him, but had seen instead the gift of life. He witnessed with his own eyes the astonishing, yet moving, sight of a man stumbling out of his own tomb, his grave wrappings still clinging to him. A man who had been dead four days, but now lived. Could Thomas still have doubted that Jesus was more than just a prophet, more than simply a good man? With the words of Martha still ringing in his ears: "I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world," what does Thomas think?

Who was He Thomas? Who was this Jesus?

Paul the Apostle later wrote that the Jews ask for signs, and the Greeks search for wisdom.⁵ If ever a man received a convincing sign, on that day Thomas received the most profound. But did he believe?

Not yet.

Thomas did not need a sign. He wanted more. He wanted to believe, but he wanted the evidence in his own hands.

Make no mistake, Thomas was not a materialist, one who rejects the supernatural, and who refuses to believe that God has spoken to man. Thomas was a Jew, a man who heard the Law of Moses in the synagogue on the Sabbath, a man who believed the Law. And the Law of Moses said, "You shall have no other gods before Me," and you shall not make a graven image. He, like other Jews of his day, believed that the ensigns of the Romans with their graven images were a blasphemous affront to God. Yes, Thomas believed the Shema: "Hear O Israel. The Lord Our God is One Lord." So how could this man, Jesus, be what He claimed? God's Son.

Yet Jesus did things that only God could do.

Thomas was perplexed. He had the doubt born of cynicism, the kind of doubt that arises from the experiences of a man's life. Something had happened to Thomas to cause him to expect the worst. Something had been sown in his soul, something not revealed, but nonetheless real, for it wrung the confidence of belief from him.

It was days later, Jesus is talking to the disciples, and He says,

"Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for 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 to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.'

5 1 Corinthians 1:22.

Thomas said to Him, 'Lord we do not **know** where You are going, how do we **know** the way?'⁶ John 14:1-5

Thomas would have put the emphasis on the word "know." "Lord we do not **know** where You are going, how do we **know** the way?" Thomas wanted to **know**. He wanted to be sure. He did not want to finish life as did Jochanan ben Saccai, not knowing.

Jesus knew he was about to die. As the Passover approached he brought his disciples together and spoke to them. Of the things he told them one in particular troubled them. He said that one of you will betray Me.

The disciples looked at one another. They were at a loss to know which one he was speaking about. They doubted. This would have foreshadowed the doubt that Thomas suffered as the authorities arrested his Lord.

It must have seemed to Thomas that all his doubts and fears were justified when Jesus surrendered Himself to the Jewish authorities. He was in Gethsemane when Judas came with the multitude. He saw Jesus led away to the courts of the Jews. As swiftly as the sword of Peter had cut off the ear of Malchus, Thomas saw Jesus separated from the disciples. Thomas, as the rest, fled for his life.

Jesus stood trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin, before Pontius Pilate, and before Herod Antipas. Contemptuous, and mocking, the king dressed the King in a purple robe and sent Him back to Pilate.

The Romans took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross to the Place of a Skull. They crucified him. With him they crucified two other men. Pontius Pilate wrote an inscription and had it attached to the cross of Jesus. It read, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews."⁷

The hope that flamed in Thomas flickered when Jesus died. The One who could heal the sick, feed the thousands and raise the dead, was gone. The feeble hope that Thomas had cherished lay buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Thomas despaired, but the death of Jesus had

⁶ Emphasis mine, author.

⁷ John 19:19.

also cast the other disciples into the valley of gloom. Yet, Thomas felt it more. For some reason he left the other disciples and went away.

Men suffering despair sometimes go away to be alone with their sorrow. Thomas had not only sorrow to wrestle with, but doubt.

The doubt of Thomas was not the doubt of a quibbler. It was not that of the immature student. The doubt of Thomas was the doubt of a man who had sought the hope of a lifetime, yet whose self-assurance had been shaken to the foundation of his soul. Had his doubts been the simple kind—mere asking for signs or proofs—Jesus could have answered him in an instant, and did in the raising of Lazarus of Bethany.

Thomas had a glimpse of the greatest of all hopes. He had climbed a mountain and had seen the vista beyond, and in the end had thought it was out of reach. Hope had abandoned him.

But Jesus did not forsake the disciples. He did not forsake Thomas. In this blackest of hours, Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, at early dawn on the first day of the week, came to the tomb in which Joseph and Nicodemus had laid the body of Jesus. They brought spices for his body.

But when they arrived, they found the stone that had covered the entrance rolled away. They entered the tomb, and did not find the body of Jesus. And it happened as they were perplexed about this that two men stood beside them. Their garments were dazzling.

They said, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen."⁸

The women returned and told the Apostles what had happened. All of them? No. Thomas was not with them. But even to the other Apostles the words of the women appeared as nonsense, and they would not believe them.

More doubting.

⁸ Luke 24:1-5.

Peter and John ran to the tomb to confirm what the women said. Indeed, the body was not there. After that fruitless search Jesus came and spoke to them.

When evening came, after the disciples had shut the doors where they were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came to them. He stood in their midst, and said,

"Peace be with you."

And when He had said this, he showed them both his hands and his side. The disciples therefore rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus therefore said to them again, "Peace be with you; As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." John 20:21-24.

But Thomas was not with them when Jesus came.

Many times, the one who doubts will attract attention to himself. The doubters of all mankind have attracted a great amount of attention. Would not those believing Apostles have attempted to reason with Thomas? Would they not have attempted to restore his confidence? At least as much as theirs had been restored. Apparently, the disciples knew where to find him. For we read next,

"The other disciples therefore were saying to him, 'We have seen the Lord!'

But he said to them, '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.' John 20:25

Thomas would not allow even his fellow Apostles to dash his hopes again. He would have an infallible demonstration of proof, or he would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead.

It was eight days later that the disciples had shut themselves again inside their room. In much the same way, Thomas had shut himself inside the room of unbelief, and of doubt.

While Thomas and the other Apostles were together, Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst, and said, "Peace be with you."

Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into My side; and be not unbelieving, but believing."
John 20:27

The effect on Thomas was immediate.

The evidence in his hands staggered him. When words formed in his mind, when he spoke, the Thomas who had said, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him," who had asked, "How do we **know** the way?" this Apostle answered with a conviction deeper and stronger than any of the other Apostles. No higher assertion of the Divine nature of Christ has fallen from apostolic lips. He said, "My Lord, and My God."⁹

No longer could he be called Thomas the Doubter. He is now Thomas the Believer. Now he knew the way as Rabbi Jochanan ben Saccai could never know it. The way was Christ Himself.

Christ had said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me."¹⁰

Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." John 20:29.

The example of Thomas is given for all the doubters of the world, for all the lost ones, for all the ages. They don't need to doubt any longer. They can know the way. And the Way is Christ—through faith in Him.

⁹ John 20:28.

¹⁰ John 14:6.

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