

The Trials and Tribulation of St. Thomas

Sovereign Grace Baptist Church

October 1, 2005

Luke 6:12-15

“And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. 13 And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles; 14 Simon, (whom he also named Peter,) and Andrew his brother, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, 15 Matthew and Thomas...”

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*Reputation is what men and women
think of us; character is what God
And angels know of us.*

~*~

Thomas Paine

Throughout Church history Thomas has been given the reputation of a man of great doubts. There is a measure of truth to the title, “*Doubting Thomas*”, but there is also an element of defamation implied. Perhaps Thomas can be rescued from the unfortunate epitaph. Consider first the simple facts of Scripture.

In the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke* nothing is said about Thomas except his name. In the gospel of John, Thomas becomes a distinct and vivid character. John refers to him as, “*Thomas who is called Didymus*”. While Thomas is a Hebrew name, Didymus is a Greek name meaning, “*twin*”. Understanding this, the early Christian community went into a frenzy of activity trying to discover whom Thomas might be a twin with.

The most interesting interpretation is found in an early writing called *The Acts of Thomas*. The apocryphal story declares that Thomas was none other than the twin brother of Jesus Himself (Chapter 3:1).

Turning to the *Word of God*, some more believable facts are discovered about Thomas such as his personal courage. This particular characteristic comes out in the wonderful story of Lazarus being raised from the dead in the town of Bethany (John 11:1-16).

Bethany [lit. *House of Figs* or, *House of Affliction*] was located close to Jerusalem. It was here that Lazarus grew sick and suddenly died. Word came to the Lord about the death of Lazarus. Jesus decided to go to the graveside of His friend. But the decision to journey to Bethany alarmed the disciples.

The disciples knew the Lord's popularity with the religious leaders in Jerusalem was in trouble. A death threat had been issued against Christ. Already, on two occasions Jesus had been subject to stoning (John 8:59; 10:31). To venture near Jerusalem appeared foolish and even suicidal. As the thoughts of bloodshed and violence crossed the minds of the disciples, Thomas finally settled the matter by saying, "*Let us also go, that we may die with him.*"

Thomas was serious. He was determined not to be disloyal and so he demonstrated the integrity of his heart by going on with Jesus. His courage inspired the others disciples to stay with the Savior as well. The courage of one man became the courage of many.

In English history, it is said that the presence of Oliver Cromwell on the field of battle was worth 10,000 soldiers. The courage of one man became the courage of many.

In the chronicles of Texas, there is the narrative of a moment of great courage which took place during the siege of the Alamo. The Alamo was a mission fortress in San Antonio, Texas. Within its walls, during the Revolution of 1836, a band of Texans made a heroic resistance against an overwhelming Mexican army. The encounter began in December of 1835, when a small Texas force captured and occupied the fortress. The co-commanding officers of the garrison were Colonel William B. Travis, 26 years old, and James Bowie. David Crockett was also in the fort with some of his *boys* from the hills of Tennessee.

The scene was set for battle when, on February 23, 1836, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna began to place 6,000 Mexican soldiers around the fort. Defending the Alamo were 184 men.

On March 5, Colonel Travis realized the small garrison was doomed. Sufficient replacements would never reach the mission in time. Assembling the men in the courtyard, Travis described their desperate plight. Then, he drew a line in the dirt with his sword and invited those who wished to cross and remain until the end to do so. The rest were free to try to escape from the Mexican army or surrender to it. All but one man crossed the line in a heroic decision to stay. During the next thirteen days, the 184 defenders of the fort died. Those who stayed had crossed a line, literally, to stand and make the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of freedom. The courage of one man became the courage of many.

The Church of Christ needs men and women and young people of courage to inspire others because the enemies of the Church are real, they are many in number and they are ruthless and deadly. Loyalty to the cause of Christ is essential, even unto death. Thomas was courageous and he was loyal under adverse conditions. He made a great decision to give up his life if necessary even though that was not going to happen at the moment.

There is a wonderful and true story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. The doctor explained that she had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance of recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was an ideal donor. “*Would you give your*

blood to Mary?” the doctor asked, and was surprised when Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, “*Sure, for my sister*”. Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room. Mary, pale and thin. Johnny, robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when their eyes met, Johnny grinned. As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, Johnny’s smile faded. He watched as the blood flowed through the tube.

When the ordeal was almost over, Johnny’s voice, slightly shaky, broke the silence. “*Doctor, when do I die?*” Only then did the doctor realize that why Johnny had initially hesitated, and why his lip had trembled when he agreed to donate his blood. He thought that by giving up his blood to his sister he was giving up his life for her. In that brief moment, he had made his great decision.

There was brief moment when Thomas made his great decision. And he said, “*Let us also go, that we may die with him*”. As Thomas was a man brave of heart, he was also a man who could become honestly confused. He tried to understand what Christ was teaching but at times it was not at all clear.

Jesus spoke of crowns and kingdoms, yet, when people came by force to make Him a king, the Lord withdrew from their presence. Christ spoke of being God and He demonstrated the powers of divinity often. However, the Lord also spoke of suffering, crucifixion, death and dying (John 14:1-8). Should divine kings talk in such a manner? Thomas was not clear as to what it all meant.

Then there was the night of the Passover. In the Upper Room during the third Passover the Lord celebrated with His disciples, Jesus spoke of the Cross-and what lay beyond that. He spoke of going away. But the spiritual truths were not understood by Thomas, or by any one else. The minds of the disciples were spiritually dull. They could not understand the great mystery of which the Lord spoke. Thomas was listening. He wanted to comprehend everything but the best Thomas could do was to interrupt and express his personal frustration. “*Lord*”, said Thomas,

“We know not where you are going;

and how can we know the way.”

The Lord was gracious. He did not rebuke Thomas in a harsh manner for his spiritual confusion. Jesus merely explained the basics of the Christian faith one more time.

“Thomas”,

said Jesus,

“remember I have taught you,

I am the way, I am the truth, and the life.

Thomas, No man cometh unto the Father but by me.

Do you understand?”

Thomas did not understand. Later he would perceive just what Jesus meant in all of His messages. For the moment, it was enough to be in the presence of the Lord.

And so it is,

to believe in Christ,

to know Him,

to love Him,

to trust Him,

that is all that really matters.

To know Christ is to know the way to heaven and to have fellowship with the Father

There is a negative side to Thomas that cannot be avoided. He was a man who found it difficult to believe when the dark clouds of life gathered about him. When Jesus died on the Cross, Thomas was devastated. Though he had been taught that Christ was to come out of the grave on the third day, he simply did not believe it would happen.

All of the miracles he had witnessed,

all of the sermons from the lips of the Lord,

all of the private conversations did not sustain him in the hour of spiritual testing.

Even when Thomas heard the resurrected Lord appeared to the other disciples he did not believe—and that was a terrible deed. Obstinate unbelief in the face of irrefutable evidence is a terrible emotion. Said Thomas,

“Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails,

And put my finger into the print of the nails,

And thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

Here is unbelief that is bold. Except Thomas was allowed to physically touch the resurrected Christ he was not going to believe.

In condescending grace, the Lord came to Thomas and was willing to let His disciple touch Him (John 20:26,27).

That would not happen again for the Lord went on to say,

“Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed”.

By the mercy of God you and I do not have to physically touch a nail scared hand in order to believe. But like Thomas we must have a very real and personal encounter with the Living Lord Jesus. Christ is not a theory but the Living Lord.

Dr. William Barclay in *The Master's Men* offers two great lessons from the Scriptural narrative of the life of Thomas in the *New Testament*.

The first lesson is that Jesus blames no man or woman or young person for wanting to be certain concerning the claims of Christ. There is nothing sinful about wanting to be convinced that Christianity is genuine.

C. S. Lewis was a thorough skeptic before he met the Master. But he was an honest skeptic and one-day the Lord broke through his doubts to fill him with faith. It is not wrong to have doubts but it is extremely wrong to continue to doubt when truth is revealed.

A second great lesson from the life of Thomas is that certainty is most likely to come to a person in the fellowship of other believers. The world is waiting, almost with bated breath, for the confessing Church to embrace its profession of faith. Many a person has turned away from the Church because the reality of a Christian's life does not match the religious rhetoric.

The divine solution is for the Church to have a spiritual renewal by encountering once more by faith the Living Lord. Historically, that is called revival. When revival comes, individuals will want to meet often with one another to tell what God is doing in their lives all the days they live. Malachi 3:16 says, *“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and they thought upon his name.”*

Tradition records that Thomas ministered in South India and there met a violent death. This concept has been widely accepted by the church in both East and West. Perhaps the greatest fact that can be said about Thomas is he served the Savior and is worthy of receiving the crown of life.

The total life of Thomas with all of its trials and tribulations serves to remind the Church that the Christian way of life is very challenging. Jesus never said it would be any different.

The Lord told those who wanted to follow Him to count the cost. He told everyone that He was going to die on a Cross and that those who came after Him must pick up their cross as well. The Lord warned that not all would remain faithful (Matt. 13:3-9; 13:18-23).

Those who endure to the end in the sphere of faith shall know the joy of entering into the presence of God.

“Are you willing to endure to the end?”

“Will you be found faithful?”

These are not idle questions for there are many ways to lose our faith. The world, the flesh, and the devil have united to destroy and damn as many souls as possible. Therefore, everything must be done to preserve and protect the delicate flower of faith from perishing.

Faith is preserved and protected when known sin is immediately confessed before God, not only on a daily basis, but as often as necessary.

Psalm 32: 5 I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.

Faith is preserved and protected when the Scriptures are mediated upon morning, noon, and night. *Psalm 119:10 With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.*

Faith is preserved and protected when the means of grace are availed such as regular attendance at worship and taking of communion. *Psalm 5:7 But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy; and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple.*

Faith is preserved and protected when personal standards are established and honored. *Romans 12:1-2 I beseech you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable, unto God, And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

Faith is preserved and protected when the gospel is shared with others for this is the will of the Lord. Acts 1:8 *But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea' and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*

Faith is preserved and protected when the heart is guarded against secret or subtle sins such as bitterness, hatred, jealousy, anger, lust, pride, and greed. Hebrews 12:15 *Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.*

Faith is protected when the face of the Lord is sought in earnest. May God grant His church grace—corporately and individually—to preserve and protect the faith that we profess to possess in Christ Jesus our Lord. A life of faith preserved and protected because it is rooted in a heart of faith pleases God.

Special note

The principal document for the tradition that Thomas preached in India is *The Acts of Thomas*, which has been preserved from c. AD 220 with some variations both in Greek and in Syriac. The narrative of the document is totally exaggerated but there is at least one seed truth that might be reflected in the manuscript. According to tradition, the apostles agreed to go in different directions to evangelize the world. By a casting of lots, large geographical territories were assigned to the Apostles. India fell to Thomas, but he declared his inability to go. As a result, Christ appeared in a supernatural way to Abban, the ambassador of Gundafor, an Indian king, and sold Thomas to him to be his slave.

Thomas was to serve Gundafor as a carpenter. “*Then Abban and Thomas sailed away until they came to Andrapolis, where they landed and attended the marriage feast of the ruler's daughter.*” Strange occurrences followed and Christ assuming the appearance of Thomas exhorted the bride to remain a Virgin.

Coming to India Thomas was given money to build a palace for Gundafor, but instead he used the money to minister to the poor. In anger, Gundafor imprisoned him; but the Apostle escaped miraculously and Gundafor was converted.

Traveling throughout the country preaching the gospel, Thomas met with strange adventures as he encountered dragons and wild asses. Then he came to the city of

King Misdai (Syriac, Mazdai), where he was able to win to Christ, the wife of Misdai, Tertia and their son Vazan. Because of this, Thomas was condemned to death. He was led out of city to a hill, and pierced through with spears by four soldiers. He was then buried in the tomb of the ancient kings but his remains were afterwards removed to the West.

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October 3, 2005

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I. Thomas, the Twin

II. A Man of Personal Courage

III. A Man Searching for Understanding

IV. A Man of Doubt During Dark and Difficult Days

V. Lessons from the Life of Thomas

- Jesus blames no one for wanting to be certain
- Certainty is most likely to come in the fellowship of other believers
- The Christian life is a challenging life and so faith must be preserved and protected

VI. How to Preserve the Faith

- Faith is preserved and protected when the means of grace are availed
- Faith is preserved and protected when personal standards are established and honored
- Faith is preserved and protected when the gospel is shared
- Faith is preserved and protected when the heart is guarded
- Faith is preserved and protected when the face of the Lord is sought in earnest

Special note. English is a strange language. You would think that full of faith and faithful would be the same thing. They are not. They are related, but they are not the same thing. To be full of faith is to have faith. To be faithful is to keep the faith. It is being true to the trust placed in us by others and by God. Everybody appreciates the person who is faithful, who will never betray a trust and never fail to keep a commitment. When we have not been faithful, it is because some doubt, however momentary or tentative, has crept in (Robert C. Shannon).