



Thomas or Didymus

Thomas, often referred to as “the doubter,” is symbolized by a carpenter’s square, representing the many churches that claimed to have been built by him. The spear is symbolic of his martyrdom.

A MAN MALIGNED

Among all the apostles, with the exception of Judas, none stands out among the rest as the target of criticism like Thomas. Writer after writer refers to him as the man who doubted something that should have been a simple truth. Yet perhaps that criticism is sometimes misplaced. Thomas was a man of conviction, a man who loved his Lord and Savior.

His Hebrew name was Thomas, and like many others of his day, he was also given a Greek name as well, Didymus. Both names mean “twin,” yet we have no information about who his twin might have been, nor do we know if that twin was a follower of the Savior. Although the name Thomas appears eleven times in the New Testament, most of those are in listings of the apostles. Once again Matthew, Mark, and Luke are silent. Thanks to John we do get to know a little more about this man of faith. In all probability, he was from Galilee (see Acts 1:11), although we do not know when or how he was called. He is first mentioned when Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs. Possibly Thomas was paired up with Matthew (see Matthew 10:3).

THOMAS THE LOYAL FOLLOWER

John shares with his readers three instances in which we gain some insight as to who Thomas was. The first is recorded in John 11. At this time Jesus was living east of the Jordan River, having left Jerusalem because the Jews were about to stone him. His stay there was short-lived because news reached him that his dear friend Lazarus was dying. Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, lived just a few miles from Jerusalem in the small town of Bethany. What should Jesus do? First he remained

where he was for two more days until he announced, “*Let us go back to Judea*”. The disciples were not at all in favor of that decision, “*But Rabbi, . . . a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?*” they asked (John 11:7,8). Finally Jesus told them that Lazarus was not just ill but that he had died. Now Jesus felt he must return to Bethany so he might “wake him up.” That is when Thomas makes his first statement as he addresses the other eleven, “*Let us also go, that we may die with him*” (John 11:16).

Many feel that comment came from a desperate heart, one filled with pessimism and doubt. Yet that statement showed the loyalty Thomas had for his Savior. Unlike Peter, who a few days later would tell Jesus in hollow and thoughtless words, “*Lord, . . . I will lay down my life for you*” (John 13:37), Thomas’ words were indeed backed up with action. Thomas did go with the Lord to Bethany, not knowing if that trip would lead to his own death as well.

THOMAS THE INQUIRER

Thomas was a serious man, and he wore a somber heart on his sleeve. John’s second mention of Thomas took place in the upper room on Maundy Thursday. Jesus covered many topics with his closest friends in the upper room. It was to be the last time he had such an opportunity before his crucifixion. Jesus especially wanted his friends to know that they should not be troubled by what was about to take place. In gentle terms Jesus told them he was going to his Father’s house to prepare a wonderful place for them and he would take them there to be with him. He said they should be confident that they would know where that place was. Yet Thomas spoke up and said he

was confused and needed more details to satisfy his troubled heart. *“Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”* (John 14:5). Thomas’ concern was that he was to be separated from the one he had grown to love, admire, and place his hope and trust in. Thomas spoke from a heart that needed greater assurance when and how he would see Jesus again. That is when Jesus gently assured Thomas that he is the Way and the Truth and the Life, as if to say, “Thomas, don’t worry, you have seen the way, and it will be marked out clearly. Only believe.”

THE TIME OF DOUBT

The third time we meet Thomas is following the resurrection. The night that Jesus rose from the dead, he visited his disciples in the locked room where all were present with



the exception of Thomas. Why was he absent? Some surmise that his depression had led him to a solitary place apart from the

rest. Such actions, however, are not substantiated in Scripture. Suffice to say that Thomas must have wished like everything to have been there. Although the other disciples repeatedly tried to assure Thomas that they had seen the risen Lord, Thomas could not quite feel confident in their story. He wanted to see Jesus with his own eyes. Again, he needed that final assurance to satisfy his troubled heart.

Lest we judge Thomas too harshly for his need for evidence of the risen Lord, we should note two verses of importance that condemn the rest of the disciples as well for the same lack of faith. Thomas was not the only one who had problems believing what had been told him regarding the resurrection. Mark 16:10 tells us that Mary Magdalene gave the report of the risen Lord to the disciples. The result was, *“When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it”* (Mark 16:11). And again we read in Luke 24:11, just following the report of the women

who had run to the apostles to tell the news of Jesus’ resurrection, *“They did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.”*

But Jesus knew the heart of Thomas. Eight days later, Jesus once again appeared to the disciples, this time with Thomas present. At this appearance, Jesus immediately turned to Thomas, almost as if that was the sole reason for this visit, and he asked Thomas to place his hands into the nail and spear marks. Jesus’ words to Thomas were simple, *“Stop doubting and believe”* (John 20:27).

Then we hear Thomas address Jesus with a name that none of the other eleven had ever spoken, *“My Lord and my God!”* (John 20:28). Those five simple words were perhaps the greatest witness ever said in all of Scripture. Thomas was the only disciple ever to claim Jesus as his God.

Perhaps Thomas’ words went far deeper than just a flippant statement by a simple doubter, as many would have us believe. Each instance that mentions Thomas shows a man who was serious about his love for the Lord. Here was a man who was willing to die with his Savior. Here was a man who felt lost without the one he loved and wanted dearly to be with him forever. Here was a man who needed proof that Jesus was the real thing, the one who bore the nail prints in his hands. Perhaps instead of criticizing Thomas we should all be more like Thomas, for the only way we can be certain that Jesus is truly the Savior is to see for ourselves the nail prints of crucifixion. Those are the hands that belong to our risen Lord as well.

WHAT BECAME OF THOMAS?

Many mixed messages are given us in the traditions regarding Thomas. Some say that he was responsible for the conversion of the Magi who brought gifts to the baby Jesus. Many claim that his ministry led him to India, where several churches claim to trace their roots back to Thomas. It is said that his burial place is near the town of Madras. Tradition also says that Thomas died a martyr’s death by being run through with a spear while he was kneeling in

prayer. Perhaps it was fitting that this man felt one final pierce of a spear, for here was the same man who found peace in the very mark made by a spear that pierced the one he loved.

Discuss: What would you have done had you been Thomas the first time Jesus visited the locked room? Do you think the apostles discussed who would travel to what distant regions?

ST. THOMAS' DAY:
December 21