

Doubting Thomas

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 March 2019

Preacher: Rev. Calum Macdonald

[0 : 00] This morning we're going to look at a passage from the section of the scripture that we read.

We're going to look at the verses 24 to 29 of John chapter 20. Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the twin, was not with them when Jesus came.

So the other disciples told him, we have seen the Lord. But he said to them, unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.

I will never believe. I'm sure most of us are familiar with this account from the scriptures.

Many people are familiar with the person of Thomas and usually we attach to the name Thomas, the appendage doubting Thomas.

[1 : 16] And we associate doubt with him in particular. It's become a byword for doubt.

The account from scripture undergirds the proverbial use of the word. But I want us to think about what this passage teaches us.

First of all, I want us to think about how doubt is spoken of in this section.

What it tells us about the nature of doubt. Every one of us perhaps uses the word doubt in different ways.

We use it to reflect our own experience of doubt in the lives that we live in the world.

[2 : 26] You know, somebody says something to us and we're skeptics. We don't believe what we've been told. Because something that we know about the passion of whom it is said suggests that the information that we've been given is of doubtful content.

So we use the word in that respect. And that may color our understanding of what the scripture is saying to us. So I want us first of all to have an understanding of this passage which is fully appreciating the way the Lord deals with it.

We need to understand that. We need to understand that Thomas is being dealt with by the Lord.

And that based upon what Thomas is saying and how he is responding to the Lord.

The Lord has to deal with him. And I want us to understand the whole nature of that relationship that exists between him and the Lord.

And the way that he responds to the Lord in the situation that he finds himself. And then I want us to see how the Lord treats Thomas.

[4 : 08] That has given our understanding of all that's going on. That there is a particular response that the Lord gives to him.

That helps us understand how we must respond to the experience of doubt. Whether it is exactly the same as the experience of Thomas or something similar to it.

Now, I don't doubt for one minute that every Christian here has at one point in their life made a confession of doubt.

A confession of their faith being not as it ought to be. With regard to their relationship with Christ, they have introduced into that relationship an element which we will say is a questioning element. And because it is universally the experience of the Christian, I don't believe for one minute that it isn't.

[5 : 35] Now, it's not the same. I mean, everybody may have this experience, but there are gradients within it. There may be people who are so burdened by what we call doubt that they are under a constant cloud.

There are others who may have fleeting occasional doubt which affects them, but not always. And because it is universally the experience of the Christian, we may think it's an acceptable experience of the Christian.

But that's what I want us to see, how the Lord deals with Thomas to help us understand how we should treat it if we ever succumb to it.

Now, because it is universal, we have kinship, if you like, with Thomas. In the same way that many Christians, I don't doubt for one minute that there are many Christians who would say, Oh, I like Peter.

I like Peter because Peter is so like myself. I've heard it so often said that Peter, because of his personality, has many characteristics and traits that we may identify with.

[7 : 10] And we may think, well, his impulsiveness is something that's so like myself. Sometimes we regret not spending more time thinking things through before we act.

Saying something hurriedly and then having to deal with the outfall of that, the fallout, if you like. Or doing things without actually working through what we're doing is something that may be best not done because of the possibilities that belong to it.

Now, Peter, in that sense, was somebody that we've seen throughout the scripture. He said things hurriedly. He's done things rashly. He's made great claims for himself that clearly were not followed through.

So like that, we're glad that there is a Peter in the scripture. And when it comes to Thomas, because of this appendage, doubting Thomas, we think, Well, Thomas, I found myself in a situation similar to your own, and I should have been clear in my own thinking, but I've been like you.

[8 : 46] Now, we need to understand this picture that we're given in the scripture. The scripture, if we are honest, seldom commends the doubter.

Even though Christians often succumb to doubt, the scripture seldom commends the doubter. And the reason for that is supplied by the words of Christ, even here.

First of all, what is true of Thomas? If you notice, in verse 25, The other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord.

But he said to them, Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, place my hand into his side, I will never believe.

I will not, is what he's saying. My will is set against doing what you're expecting me to do.

[10 : 01] It is a willful act of unbelief on his part. Now, I believe that Jesus highlights the willfulness of Thomas' failure in the way that he rebukes him.

In verse 27, he says to him, Put your finger here, and see my hands, and put out your hand, and place it in my side.

Do not disbelieve, but believe. Now, Jesus is not someone who is going to be deliberately critical of somebody for no good reason.

If Jesus sees the need for a person to be rebuked or corrected, he administers that rebuke, albeit lovingly.

And his words to Thomas here are words that describe what Thomas is doing as faithlessness.

[11 : 17] Now, you may argue that what we're faced with here are exceptional circumstances, and no doubt they were. but if you also understand that when Jesus administers what we believe to be a word of rebuke, he is not unaware of the circumstances.

You know, sometimes we may speak to someone and say, well, you shouldn't have done that without realizing or knowing what lay behind that person's actions.

Jesus knew perfectly well who Thomas was and what he had done and the circumstances surrounding what Thomas had done.

when Peter was walking on the water, you'll remember he began to sink and Jesus had to take hold of him.

And again, the words are words of rebuke. He says, Peter, you are someone of little faith. Why did you doubt?

[12 : 33] He, you think, well, Peter, you're sinking, but that's to be expected. You're walking on water. Well, I understand your difficulty.

But Jesus is quite severe in the way that he deals with Peter because Peter should have had his eyes on the Lord. And Peter, should have trusted in the Lord in that situation.

And Jesus treats him accordingly. We have another example and perhaps this is more surprising than even Peter's where the disciples are confronted with a person who is demon-possessed.

And they fail to heal that person. And they find themselves to be the focus again of Jesus' ire because he says, you are faithless and perverse, he says.

Now, that seems extreme and severe on the part of Jesus. But what he is saying to them is that they had the potential to do more and it was their lack of faith that kept them back.

[13 : 59] If they had put their trust in Christ, if they had done what they were called to do, looking to him, then the outcome would have been different.

It's important to differentiate between faithlessness and doubt to make a distinction between complete faithlessness and doubt.

the Greek word from which we get out is a word that is, in the case of Peter, it describes to us somebody who is confronted with a dilemma.

He is standing in a road and he is coming to a fork in the road and he's not sure which one of these paths to follow.

And there is a clear indication that the word itself helps you understand in that situation that there is justifiable grounds for accepting the uncertainty that is there.

[15 : 13] There's a dilemma. Instead of having the path before you that you must walk in, there's a choice and you're not sure what the choice is.

And the word that is used about Peter in that situation is that word. Again, just another example of it at the end of Matthew's Gospel.

When the Lord speaks to the disciples there, he is saying to them, when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.

Again, that word. They're not sure. when the disciples are confronted with, and disciples there is broader term for disciples, they're confronted with somebody that is more a spirit to them.

They're not sure whether this person is a ghostly apparition or somebody who is to be worshipped as God. There's a dilemma there.

[16 : 24] Now, a stronger, more certain word in a negative self, also applying doubtfulness, we find applied to Herod when he was being dealt with by John the Baptist.

He wasn't sure. It's a stronger doubtfulness. doubtfulness. He is confronted with a fact that he is not prepared to accept.

Again, festers when he reflects on Paul's preaching. But again, the word used there for doubtfulness is not a word that is in any way describing to us something that is commendable.

It is something that is questionable. Now, again and again, what we find connected with this word is simple.

And we may argue against it, but at the heart of it is this. There's a refusal on the part of the person confronted with a fact to believe what they are presented with.

[17 : 40] You have facts, presented, and despite these facts being presented to you, there is a reluctance on the part of the person to accept it.

When I was in college, one year of the late Douglas Macmillan teaching his history, and the second year late Professor Cartwright was teaching his history.

Professor Cartwright was someone who frequently referred to a Dutch theologian called Herman Bavinck. I wasn't familiar with his writing at that point, but he referred to him quite extensively during his lectures.

And one book that was written by Herman Bavinck was a book with the title The Certainty of Faith. The Certainty of Faith.

Now I'm going to give you a quotation from Bavinck, because he was dealing in this book with the privileged position that the Christian has as men and women of faith who are resting upon certainties, not doubtful or truths that are questionable.

[19 : 00] And he says this, and remember this man was writing many years ago now, but the truth I think still stands.

Doubt, he said, has now become the sickness of our century, bringing with it a string of moral problems and plagues. Nowadays many people take into account only what they can see.

They deify martyr, worship mammon, or glorify power. The number of those who still utter an undaunted testimony of their faith with joyful enthusiasm and complete certainty is comparatively small.

Families, generations, groups and classes have turned away from all authority and broken with their faith, even among those who still call themselves believers.

how many must screw up their courage into a forced unnatural belief? How many believe as a result of habit, laziness, or lack of spirit?

[20 : 12] How many act out of an unhealthy attempt to recover the past or out of a misleading conservatism? there is much noise and movement, but little genuine spirit, little genuine enthusiasm, issuing from an upright, fervent, sincere faith.

I forgive the long quotation, but what he is doing is pinpointing the certainties that belong to the experience of faith that are being eroded by allowing doubt to enter in.

And what we see here is that what we need to understand that as far as faith, the Christian faith, is concerned, certainty on the part of the believer is more than just possible.

It should be, as Bavinck goes on to expound, it should be the default position of a Christian. The Christian is someone who, by reason of their faith, are in a position of unassailable strength.

Now, it's not their strength, it's their faith resting upon the finished work of a saviour that they have placed their trust in.

[22 : 04] Now, when you come to thinking about this, what you find is that very often in the Old Testament and in the New Testament also, the position of the believer was compared to someone residing within a fortress.

And because they were resident within that fortress, they were safe. God was their fortress. God was the person who had garrisoned the walls around them that would keep them safe.

Now, the scripture is never saying to the believer, you will not be assailed, you will not be attacked, you will not be someone who will be free from the enemy's arrows.

but the place that you're in by reason of your faith and the God upon whom you rest and the saviour in whom you have put your trust ensures that these arrows will not destroy you.

You are in a safe haven. Spurgeon uses this illustration, he says, there are many believers who live in the cottage of doubt when they can live quite happily in the mansion of faith.

[23 : 40] Now, is that you, a believer who is riddled with doubt because the doubt has been permitted to occupy the place that your faith insists on possessing in order for you to live your faith out in a way that's beneficial.

Now, I've said, Jesus clearly deals with Thomas in a way that he does not permit Thomas to continue in the grip of doubt.

God and he just doesn't speak harshly to him or severely to him. He speaks to him in order to recover Thomas, in order to allow Thomas to recover the position that is rightfully his.

Now, what was the biggest problem Thomas had? Thomas knew that Jesus had died on the cross. And he is essentially doting the resurrection of Jesus.

That's what he's doting. He didn't see the risen Jesus for himself. And because he didn't see the risen Jesus for himself, as far as Thomas was concerned, Jesus was buried.

[25 : 15] He was dead and buried. and unless he was given the evidence to the contrary, doubt would continue.

And the thing is that if we look at verse 29 again, he says, Thomas, Jesus said to him, have you believed because you have seen me?

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. We see the compassion of Jesus in the way that he deals with people who have wronged him.

People who should know better, but by that behavior clearly need to be brought face to face with what is wrong.

Jesus takes Thomas and he gives Thomas what he wants. In a sense he says, Thomas says, well look, if I don't see the print of the nails, not even see them, if I don't put my finger into the print of the nails, if I don't put my fist into the hole that the spear has done in your side, I'm not going to believe.

[26 : 34] And Jesus says, well Thomas, this is what you wanted. I'm here before you, you come and do what you've asked to do. But Thomas, in the way that Jesus deals with him, immediately sees the wrong of his request.

Mark Johnson, one of the commentators, says that it is the trustworthiness of the apostolic testimony that undergirds the gospel message itself.

The blessing received by Thomas in meeting the risen Christ, every believer receives by faith. Now that's very interesting because we would assume that Thomas' recovery has to do with a physical encounter with the risen Christ.

Christ. And if that were the case, then it would be necessary for every one of you to have a physical encounter with the risen Christ, which is clearly not what he intends.

The encounter with Christ that the believer has is an encounter that you have had with him in his word. and by way of his word, you know that Jesus is risen indeed.

[28 : 08] if you remember, there's a story told us in Luke's gospel of two men walking on the road to a mace.

And they're downcast, and their spirits are down. You could see their heart was in their boots. And they're walking on the road to a mace, and this person comes and walks with them.

And he speaks to them. Now, when he speaks to them, they have no idea who is speaking to them. It is Jesus, but they don't recognize him. And what does he do? Does he say that? Look at me.

Look at me.

Look at me. See if you recognize who it is that's speaking to you. No, he's not doing that. What he does is he leads them into his word, scripture.

[29 : 11] And he starts opening out the scripture to them. He starts talking to them about himself from the scripture. He doesn't tell us which scripture.

It could be, some suggest Isaiah 53, any part of Isaiah, any part of the Old Testament scriptures that prophesy what Jesus was going to do and what he was going to accomplish.

And Jesus directs him to that. And what's the outcome? Well, we're told that as they walk along with Jesus, at that moment, they're not aware of who Jesus is, but their hearts begin to warm.

It burns within them because through his word, they see Jesus. They see him, not physically, but spiritually.

Now, Thomas, when he met with Jesus, even though he met with a physical Jesus, Jesus tells them, Thomas, have you believed because you have seen me?

[30 : 25] blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed. What is he saying to them?

This is where you take your doubts.

This is where you take your doubts always. Whatever these doubts are, you take them to the word and you take them to where the word brings Christ before your eye and there your doubts are dissipated, the doubts are diminished.

Somebody said this very simple truth and I hold to it, believe your beliefs and doubt your doubts.

Not your own personal beliefs, but the belief that scripture has given to you, the word that God has made a living word to you, go to that and you trust in it.

And when you do, the experience that Thomas has and that is condemned, I believe, by Christ will not be a continuing problem.

Let me finish with this. Sibbes the Puritan gives a solemn warning and he says this, when we find evidence of the grace of God, we must take care not to deny it, lest we grieve the spirit.

[31 : 56] What a dishonor it is to God and his spirit when doubt gets the better of our passion. A dishonor to God, a dishonor to God's spirit.

We may think that it is okay to allow doubt to have a toehold, a foothold, to be the dominant part of our character, but Jesus says, blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed.

You believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and put your trust in what he has done and don't allow doubt to get the better of you.

And the more believing you are, the more useful you are as his servants here in the world. May bless to us these few thoughts.

Let us pray. Ever blessed God, we give thanks that we have the examples of the saints in the scripture. Saints that are held out to us that we may follow their example and at other times held out to us that we may learn from their mistakes.

[33 : 23] Help us to be diligent followers of the truth and to look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Forgive our sins in him.

Amen. Our concluding psalm is Psalm 42 from the Scottish Psalter. Psalm 42 again from the Scottish Psalter and verses 3 to 5.

Psalm 42 My tears have unto me been meet both in the night and day while unto me continually where is thy God they say my soul is poured out in me when this I think upon because that with the multitude I heretofore had gone with them and to God's house I went with voice of joy and praise here with the multitude that kept the solemn holy day so why art thou cast down my soul why in me so dismayed trust God for I shall praise him yet house countenance is mine aid will sing these verses my tears have unto me been meet both in the night and day my tears shall enter me be both in the night and day while enter me continually with it is thy goddess say my soul is poured and hurt

in me when this

I think upon because that with love and assured I here to for had gone with them into God's house I
went with voice of joy yon praise yea with the much assured that kept the solemn holy days oh why
art thou cast down my soul why enemy so dismayed trust

God for I shall praise him yet his kindness is my need now may grace mercy and peace from God
the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit rest and abide with you all now and always amen