

The Twelve Apostles

Lesson 10

Study Notes

Thomas: The Apostle Most Maligned

Or

Thomas: The Pessimist

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Text: John 11: 1-16

Introduction: Most of us often refer to Thomas as "doubting Thomas" because of his absence at the first appearance of Christ to his disciples; and his statement to their excitement was that he would not believe unless he could see the nail prints in his hands and thrust his hand into the Lord's side. I think it would fairer to say of Thomas that he was devoted more so than a doubter. We should probably see him more of a pessimist as well. Pessimism than doubt seems to have been his besetting sin. We should remember that all of the apostles were slow to believe at first of the Lord's resurrection. From the preceding text we learn something of Thomas devotion to the Lord in that he was willing to die if necessary if that was what the Lord would be facing. Note the disciples concern in the Lord's visit to Bethany knowing the Jews of late sought to stone him and yet He was returning to face that danger.

Thomas states: "Let us go, that we may die with him" indicating he was a better man than often he is given credit for. It seems that if the Lord was going there to die and the hand of his enemies; then Thomas was willing to die as well.

All we have recorded for us in Matthew, Mark and Luke is his name listed with the twelve apostles. John alone gives us the details we have of his life and character. Since the book of John deals with the deity of Christ, Thomas is the lone apostle who calls the Lord his God.

We will study the life of Thomas from the three accounts that John mentions him in his writings

It becomes obvious from John's record that Thomas had a tendency to look only into the darkest corners of life. He seemed always to anticipate the worst of everything. Yet despite his pessimism, some wonderfully redeeming elements of his character come through in John's account of him.

I. The Significance of His Name.

His Hebrew name Thomas with its Greek equivalent Didymus, means "a twin."

Thomas which is called Didymus." Thomas, according to the Syriac importance of his name, had the title of Didymus - both names meaning "a twin" - the same name expressed in different languages.

There is speculation as to who Thomas's twin was and since the Scriptures are silent as to who it was, we must remain silent on the subject as well. He is listed in association with Matthew and listed after Matthew except in Matthew's gospel he places Thomas ahead of himself. He is listed as the last of the second group of four.

Eusebius, one of the earliest historians of the church, says that Thomas' real name was Judah, and that his nickname, "Twin," may well have been used by his companions to distinguish him from the two other Judah's - the brother of James, and Judas Iscariot.

II. The Record of His Call to Apostleship.

As far as gospel history is concerned, we know absolutely nothing about the kinsmen of Thomas, his place of residence, or occupation. The first three gospels give us nothing but his bare name, and, as we have seen with Philip, we are indebted to John for the few but interesting particulars, investing Thomas with flesh and blood, making him stand out before us a real man, with those distinct and impressive qualities from which we can learn much. That Thomas was a Jew is certain, and in all probability, he was a Galilean (Acts 1: 11). From legendary material we gather that he was born of poor parents, who brought him up to the trade of fishing, and who gave him a useful education, instructing him in the knowledge of the Scriptures, whereby he learned wisely to govern his life and manners.

The New Testament is silent as to when and how Thomas was called to discipleship. Nevertheless, an honor to be called to such a great task. It may be details such as these are omitted so that we will not try to match our call from the Lord to mimic others and miss the importance of just doing what Christ's commissions each of us to do.

III. The Fearlessness of His Devotion.

John 11:16 Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellow disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

What became apparent to Thomas that the Lord was determined to go to Bethany and risk being stoned at the hands of those who so hated Him. The character of his devotion to the Lord comes through here as John records his statement.

The Master has always had among His followers those who have seen, as if by inspiration, what ought to be done; who have been swift to see where duty led, and what devotion to Christ ought to lead to; and Thomas remains as the forerunner of them all. Let us, therefore, cease maligning Thomas, accusing him of morbid fear, gloominess, and pessimism. He was a choice spirit, with a nobility and worth of character some theologians have not fairly recognized. His chief characteristic was that of a deep and devoted love ever ready to leave all for Christ, dare all for Christ, and die with Christ. (Lockyer)

Thomas had a deep devotion to Christ that could not be dampened even by his own pessimism. He had no illusion that following Jesus would be easy. All he could see were the jaws of death opening to swallow him. But he followed Jesus with an undaunted courage. He was resolved to die if necessary, with his Lord rather than forsake Him. He would rather die than be left behind and separated from Christ.

IV. The Quest of His Mind for Knowledge.

John 14:1-6. Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.2 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.3 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.4 And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know.5 Thomas saith

unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?6 Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

What is evident is the fact that in His reply to the statement and question of Thomas, Jesus gave utterance to one of the most sublime revelations of Himself to be found in Scripture. How can we know the way? Only One could supply the answer - The Way, Himself, who is the sum-total of all that we need to know, to believe, to love, to follow. He is all we need for time and eternity. We can never have more than He is; we must never be satisfied with less. So, Thomas's quest for deeper knowledge was satisfied, and he must have been thrilled to learn that his Lord was: The Way to God - The Way without which there is no going. The Truth of God - The Truth without which there is no knowing. The Life from God - The Life without which there is no living. (Lockyer)

V. The Demand for Facts About His Lord.

John 20:24-29. But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, 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.26 And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.27 Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.28 And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

Why was Thomas not present with the others at this time we do not know. It has been suggested that he was so negative, so pessimistic, that he was such a melancholy person, that he was absolutely destroyed, and he was probably off somewhere wallowing in his own misery. He could see only the worst of everything. Now his worst fear had been realized. Jesus was gone, and Thomas was sure he would never see Him again. Thomas may well have felt alone, betrayed, rejected, forsaken. The One he loved so deeply was gone, and it tore his heart out. It is natural for us to want to be alone in circumstances such as this.

Let it be made clear, however, that we do not know the reason why Thomas was not present, nor can we guess why he alone was absent. Feeling, as the rest of the apostles had done, that the sealed sepulchre was the grave of all hopes.

While we may criticize Thomas for his desire of evidence of His Lord's resurrection; he gives us a surer word that Jesus is alive by the testimony of Thomas himself "My Lord and my God." He is the only person in the New Testament to address our Lord as God. John's gospel is, of course, in a special sense the gospel of our Lord's deity. The compassionate Savior did not take advantage of His disciple's refractory unbelief, but urged him to satisfy his faith by a demonstration from sense, and quickly convinced of his error, Thomas acknowledged his Risen Master to be the omnipotent One. What a thrill must have been his to see how his Lord had triumphed over death!

It has been said that Thomas doubted so that we will never have to doubt. I am glad to be in the number Jesus said that would believe having never seen.

John 20:29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

We were saved by faith through grace, and endure as seeing Him who is invisible.

We are blessed with the presence of the Holy Spirit to take away our doubt and fear and assures us of the hope of salvation in Jesus Christ alone. We can learn from Thomas that we don't have to doubt we can simply be devoted. There is a considerable amount of ancient testimony that suggests Thomas carried the gospel as far as India. The strongest traditions say he was martyred for his faith by being run through with a spear, a fitting form of martyrdom for one whose faith came of age when he saw the spear mark in his Masters' side.