

Thomas: From Doubter to World Changer

By Dr. Stan Fleming

“Doubting Thomas” - that’s what most people remember about Christ’s disciple, but I think he gets a bad rap.

We only know a little of Thomas’ background. He was a native of Galilee and called Didymas, meaning “the twin”. One apocryphal myth says he was the twin brother of Jesus, but the Bible plainly names the natural brothers of Jesus (Mt. 13:55) and Thomas is not among them. He was possibly a fisherman, like Peter, because he is named next to Peter in the fishing trip mentioned in John 21:2).

In regard to Thomas being characterized as the doubter, we know that Peter had his moments (Mt. 14:31) as did all of the disciples (Mk. 4:40), but they are not labeled like Thomas. I dare say that most Christians doubted the Lord before their conversion and even sometimes afterwards. It is true that James tells us that doubters are double-minded (James 1:5-8), but Jude also tells us to be merciful to those who doubt (Jude 22). As a matter of fact, Christ’s mission was to change doubters into believers. There is a story in Mark 9:20- 27 in which Jesus tells the father of a sick child, that if he will believe, all things are possible. The father cried and said, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief”. Jesus did! He healed the child.

We all struggle with the need for more faith at times. The apostles once said to Jesus, “Lord, increase our faith” (Lu. 17:5). So He told them about the mustard seed. But Jesus did not just teach them about faith, He would lead them into circumstances that tested and grew their faith. He knows just what we need. He knew what Thomas needed.

Here are some things the Bible teaches us about Thomas. He challenged the others to go with Jesus to Beth- any and die - if necessary (John 11:16). This demonstrated tenacious love for Christ, even though he did not understand the reasons or what Jesus did. He was also bold. Rather than just faking that he understood something that he did not, he was willing to question the Lord.

When Jesus told the disciples that they knew where He was going and the way to get there, it was Thomas who responded, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” Jesus’ famous answer to Thomas brings illumination and revelation to every

searching heart: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (John 14:5-6)

It is in the passage of John 20:24-29 that Thomas has forever become associated with the term “doubting Thomas”. Jesus had already appeared to the other disciples after His resurrection, but Thomas was not there; so he refused to believe until he had a personal, direct experience. We can only imagine what he thought. “Why did they see Him and not me?” “I saw Him die; how could He live?”

As a result of his remarks, the term “doubting Thomas” is now often used to describe people who refuse to believe something unless it is proven to them. However, when Christ appeared again, Thomas was there. Jesus exhorted him to touch His wounds and believe. Thomas exhibited his new belief by boldly saying to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” (V. 28) He became the first to confess Christ’s divinity so explicitly. Jesus then approves of Thomas’ faith, but highly commends the faith of those who should believe without having seen (V. 29).¹ Eventually, Thomas went forth with zealous faith to proclaim Jesus to the world! Historians have a greater certainty about the acts of Thomas than all the other disciples, except for those of John and Peter.

There are strong traditions of Thomas’ ministry in the nations of Babylon, Syria, Afghanistan, as well as northern and southern India. Some ancient writings say he went as far as China. One legend is that Thomas found the three wise men in his travels and baptized them to become Christians. They later were martyred in Persia (modern Iran). Though this is quite unlikely, we do know that Thomas probably established the first Babylonian church, after converting Jews in that area.

A source of great antiquity says the apostles divided up the regions of the world to evangelize; the lot of India fell to Thomas. He did not want to go, but through a miracle of God, he realized that it was his destiny.²

Tradition says that he arrived in Malabar in southern India in 52 AD. He converted Hindu families and kings in various places. Thousands came to the Lord. Thomas planted many churches. It is interesting that the Syrian churches also celebrate Thomas’ arrival to their country in 52. It could be that Thomas went first to Syria, then northern India and then to Malabar. The modern Christian community of southern India looks back to Thomas as the founding apostle. He changed society in that part of the world. In 1952 the Thomas Christians in Malabar

¹ Barnes’ Notes, Electronic Database, BibleSoft, 1997

² Acts of the Holy Apostle Thomas

celebrated 1900 years of Thomas' evangelistic influence. The miracles and missions ascribed to the apostle are too numerous to name.

In the year 72, he aroused the anger of the Brahmin priests who had him assassinated. He was pierced with a lance while praying in a cave in Mylopur, a suburb of Madras, India.

Today, numerous Christians in Babylon, Syria, India and other places would not describe Thomas as a doubter, but as a bold evangelist and church planter. The traditions of his zeal in those places have survived to modern times. He had a profound impact upon many whose lives were changed for eternity. After seeing the risen Christ, Thomas became known as **“Thomas the Believer”**, but few today use this characterization. Yet, this one-time doubter became a hero of the faith and a world changer.