

THOMAS THE ASPOSTLE: BETWEEN DOUBT & A HARD PLACE by Nancy White

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Probably every one of us has had at least one nick name growing up. Maybe you still do. Whether based on a physical characteristic (carrot top, stretch, tiny), a hobby, or a habit, nick names are meant to represent what others consider a notable part of who we are in their eyes.

The apostle Thomas had a nickname among his fellow apostles. But, it may not be the one that automatically comes to your mind. According to John 11:16, his nickname was “the twin.” So, while some may think of him as “doubting Thomas,” you will find that he was never called that in the Bible.

The incident from which he is given his more well known nickname is found in John 20:24-28 [New Living Translation throughout]: “One of the disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin) was not with the others when Jesus came. They told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he replied, ‘I won’t believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side.’ Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. He said,

‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don’t be faithless any longer. Believe!’ ‘My Lord and my God,’ Thomas exclaimed.”

In this segment, used by some to define him as “doubting Thomas,” the Bible simply refers to Thomas as “the twin.” Later, in Acts 1:12-15, Thomas is mentioned as being among the group together after the Lord’s death. So, even looking back on the “doubting incident,” Thomas was not branded as “the doubter” by his peers.

Why not? Maybe he was not considered a doubter because Thomas was simply asking for what the others had all already received: proof that the one standing before them actually was the resurrected Christ. In considering Thomas, we must not lose site of the fact that all of the disciples had to be shown Jesus’ scars in order to confirm that He was the Lord they’d walked with for three years. If we go back just a few scriptures from the “doubting Thomas incident” to John 20:19-21 we find this: “That evening on the first day of the week, the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! ‘Peace be with you,’ he said. As he spoke, he held out his hands for them to see, and he showed them his side...”

It is also possible they didn't think of him as "doubting Thomas" because Thomas doubted the word *of his fellow apostles*; but, when it came right down to it, he did not doubt the proof Christ provided to him. Thomas said, to use modern terminology, "I'll believe it when I see it" and, when he saw it, true to his word, he believed.

Whatever the reason that Thomas wasn't branded as "the doubter" in the scriptures, the bottom line is that Thomas' one recorded incident of doubt wasn't a bad thing.

While doubt has its dark side, it can be the starting path to true, unshakable belief. A time of doubt and questioning, if handled properly, can bring us to greater belief and to life-long obedience. That is what it doubt did for Thomas.

In our "show me the nail prints" society how do we know the difference between good doubt and bad doubt? More importantly, how can we use questioning to strengthen instead of tearing down our belief? How do we maintain belief in God as this world becomes a less trusting and trustworthy place? Ironically, "doubting Thomas" shows us the way.

To find an example of bad doubt, we can look to Old Testament Israel. After 10 plagues, parted seas, food from heaven, a cloud to guide them by day and a pillar of fire by night, they still did not obey on any kind

of consistent basis. They showed no lasting belief, even though God talked to them personally. For Old Testament Israel, doubt was used time and time again to excuse disobedience. God kept proving Himself to them and they kept saying, “Well, how have you proven yourself to me lately?”

Israel never allowed the proof of the past to be carried forward with them into the present. They never used the proof provided in the past to shore them up with faith for the future. Instead, they took the easier route of going back to doubt, rather than moving ahead in belief. This is especially true when they found themselves to be faced with tough times and any amount time had lapsed between their present circumstance and the last miracle God had performed.

We should not allow ourselves to get caught up in a similar cycle of doubt that leads to disobedience. We should not allow ourselves to get caught in the trap of using doubt as our excuse for disobedience.

Besides Thomas, the twin, a good example of the right kind of doubt is Gideon. When asked to go to battle for God, Gideon first asked God to make his fleece wet and the ground dry and then to make the fleece dry and the ground wet. After these requests for miraculous proof that God was with him were granted, Gideon took action. He did what God asked him to do. There is no mention that he ever needed proof again. Like Thomas, when

Gideon's doubts and requests for proof were answered, he obeyed and never looked back.

The difference between the actions of Old Testament Israel and both Thomas and Gideon is the difference between good doubt and bad doubt – doubt used to strengthen our faith and doubt used as an excuse to throw it away.

Bad doubt is a paralyzing need for proof on an on-going basis. It is like a bottomless pit of need for proof that is never satisfied.

Good doubt also seeks answers or proof. However, after the proof comes, good doubt results in action. Good doubt is a point along the lifeline of a Christian. With good doubt, the proof requested is carried forward as a help or support, in facing tough times ahead.

When we stick a peg in the ground with God and say “this is what I need in order to believe” (as Thomas did and as Gideon did before him) we have a responsibility to respond with belief from that point forward. When God comes through for us, we must move forward from that point and not ask God to prove himself over and over, even when doubt tries to well up again. We must move forward, even when things aren't going well, even when times get tough, even when there is some distance of time between when we received our proof and our current circumstances.

Gideon, Thomas and Old Testament Israel all had questions, all had doubts and all experienced life-changing miracles. But their responses were not the same. A life-changing miracle should affect us for the rest of our lives. For Gideon and Thomas, their experiences changed them forever. For Old Testament Israel: not so much.

Sadly, there is some of the character of OT Israel in all of us. We have all experienced situations that tried my faith and tested my foundation of belief. We have all wrestled with questions, uncertainty and fear. But, what can we do – those of us who have seen miracles – those of us who have had proof of God – those of us who have therefore committed to belief?

Many times in our lives we will find ourselves either waiting on God to respond to requests or facing a response we don't like. It is in these times that we have to ask ourselves "am I going to let the proof God has given me in the past stand me in good stead now? Or will I let doubt creep back in and overtake me?"

After Christ Jesus was crucified, the apostles all had doubt. They may have wondered their initial belief in Jesus and His promises was misplaced. Then, Jesus showed up with his nail prints and spear wound and let them know that their belief in Him had not been misplaced and their work had just begun. He also let them know that their work from that point forward would

now be the more difficult work of continuing on in belief when He would no longer be visible to them.

It is through the times of waiting and the times when God allows suffering that we come to understand the difference between that acceptable initial doubt and the on-going doubt that paralyzes. The difference is in what happens in the tough times. If we don't want to fall into that bad form of doubt, then we continue to do what we are called to do – we continue to move forward in faith – and that faith is proven in obedience. We do not revert to the need for proof. Instead, we call to mind the proof already given to us.

The way to avoid the wrong, paralyzing, insatiable doubt that caught up with Israel time and again is simple to express: just keep doing what the faithful are supposed to do. But it can be difficult for us to follow this path.

The easier route is to disregard that past proof and say, “I'm just not sure any more. Things aren't going well right now. I don't feel God's presence with me. Maybe I was wrong about that proof I thought I had before. Therefore, maybe I don't have to obey.”

There are times in every believer's life when we find it easy to remain steadfast in belief. There are other times when our Christian journey is rough and trials seem to pile up and God seems to be far away. It is in these times

of trial that we may be tempted to doubt and, therefore, give up. At these times we must apply the antidote to bad doubt and keep walking the Christian walk.

In the beginning of their Christian journeys, all of the apostles had doubt. However, once God proved Himself to them, none of them ever went back on the faith. They all kept walking the Christian walk until the end -- many of them dying as martyrs for that belief.

The apostle John may have wrestled with doubt on the island of Patmos. The apostle Peter may have wondered what God would do in his various and frequent difficult circumstances. I imagine that the apostle Paul questioned when they ax would fall and he'd face the terrible death God had outlined for him. But they never stopped moving, never stopped doing what God asked them to do, never went back.

In the film "Bruce Almighty," Bruce gets to take on God's job for a while. In response to his own disappointment that God did not immediately answer his prayers and in an effort to end all the misery and pleading of the rest of the world around him, Bruce decides to answer all prayers "yes" -- granting every request. The result was a mess, as you can imagine. For example, millions of people had to split the lottery jackpot. Bruce's give-

them-everything-they-ask-for strategy did not make the world a happier place.

I believe if I were to find myself in Bruce's shows I would be tempted to do the same thing. I wonder how God can bear the suffering He sees in the world today. I wonder how He can say "no" to healing a child with terminal cancer. I wonder how God can resist raining hail, fire and brimstone down on our degenerate society. How does God bear the inhumanity of man against man, race against race, and religion against religion that goes on every single day?

I can't answer those questions, but I do know that God's plans are bigger than the issues at hand. He is able to stay His course because He knows the outcome and that outcome is sure. I believe that, in part, it is God's focus on this ultimate, wonderful and sure outcome that directs His every decision. When He answers yes, when He answers no, when He keeps quiet for a while, maybe He is testing our belief. Maybe He is saying, in effect, you've seen the nail prints in the past; let's see what you do now.

I don't propose to know God's mind, but I know from scripture that He encourages us to keep *our* eyes on the ultimate goal and to remember what He has done for us in the past. So, it isn't too far-fetched to think He would do the same.

Doubt may be easy, but the end of wrong doubt is hard – it can result in a loss of faith and, if not repented of, even a loss of our eternal reward. Belief may be hard at times in our lives. But, like “doubting Thomas,” we can ask God to prove Himself to us. Then, we must accept that proof and move forward, letting that proof make it easier for us to keep going forward in obedience and belief, no matter what comes our way.

Have you experienced the miracle of answered prayer? Maybe you’ve experienced the miracle of conversion – of a life turned-around. Maybe you’ve experienced the miracle of other prayers answered – safety in troubled times, peace during difficulty, healing, etc. Answered prayer – miracles large and small – can and will help us live our lives without succumbing to bad (irresolvable) doubt.

If you have not yet received proof of God, ask for it. He created us. He knows our need for proof, especially in the initial days of our relationship with Him.

However, if you have received proof or when you do receive it, then, in Christ’s own words to Thomas, “don’t be faithless any longer, but believe.” And keep believing, even when that miracle seems so distant in the past, even when you can no longer put your fingers in the nail prints. Put doubt behind, bring your proof forward and believe.

All of us must choose between doubt and that hard place of belief. We may find that we have to make that choice many times in our lives. But when we continue to choose belief no matter what we face in this life, then we will earn the nick name “believer.”