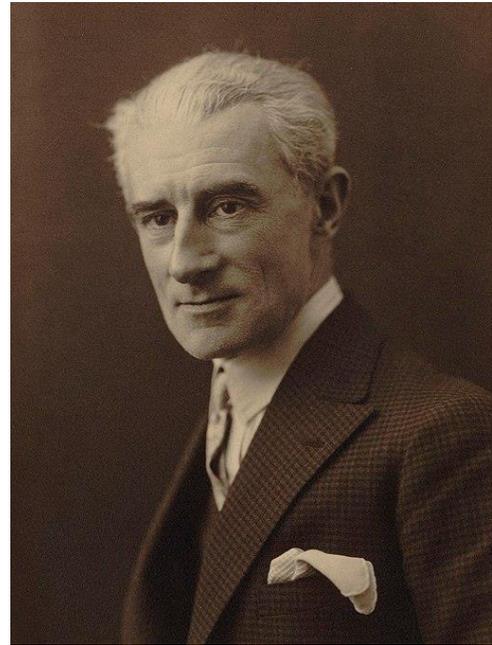


Sent Ones: Thomas, the Misunderstood Apostle
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
By Phil Brainerd
Presented to Trinity Church of Teaneck, NJ
On Sunday, February 6, 2022

Introduction

Have you ever felt misunderstood? If you’re like most people, at some point in your life you’ve felt that way. Lots of people in history have been misunderstood. I think that the biggest group of people who feel this way are artists.

Here’s a good example: If you lived in France around the turn of the last century, you would have known the name Maurice Ravel. He was a composer, pianist, and conductor. As a young man, he was able to attend the premier music school in France: The Paris Conservatory. Sadly, while he was there, he was misunderstood by his instructors. He wrote music that they thought to be strange. However, upon leaving, he found an audience. But sometimes, even they didn’t understand him.



Maurice Ravel, French Composer

His most famous piece of music is called “Bolero.” This is a unique piece of music. To put it in the simplest terms, when Ravel composed this work for orchestra, he wanted to see how many times he could repeat the same tune. He started with a flute playing his tune. Then, he had a clarinet play the same tune. He kept repeating the tune, each time with a different instrument or set of instruments. He had the instruments gradually play louder and louder. In the end, he had a 15-minute composition where the same tune had been repeated a large number of times.

When he wrote it, he considered it a kind of intellectual exercise. He didn’t think anyone would like it - He didn’t even think he could find an orchestra to play it. However, musicians thought differently. An orchestra did play it. When they were done playing it, the audience jumped to their feet with thunderous cheers and applause. People were shouting things like “Beautiful – a work of genius.”

It is said that Ravel sat with a friend off to the side. Each time someone yelled out a compliment, he said to his friend, “They don’t really understand.”

But then he heard a different voice. Somewhere in the crowd, one elderly woman jumped to her feet and yelled out in anger: “Madman! You are a madman!” When Ravel heard that, he turned to his friend and said, “She understands.”

Today, Ravel is considered one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century. His composition, “Bolero” is often played by the best symphony orchestras. But during his life, he was not always understood.

It’s not at all uncommon for artists to be thought of as crazy during their lifetime, only to be heralded as geniuses after they die.

Now, sometimes, it goes the other way. Sometimes, a person has something unique and good that characterizes their life - Only, they’re remembered as something much less. We’re going to talk about someone who falls into that group today. ***If you have ever felt misunderstood, maybe you’ll find a friend today.***

We’re in our series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells us About the King of the Universe.” We’re working our way systematically through Matthew’s book about the life of Jesus. A little while back, we started a subseries called, “Sent Ones.” Jesus had a world-changing message that he wanted to share with the world - His gospel. He found twelve men to help - Twelve “Apostles” (The word “Apostle” means “Sent one).

We’ve been meeting these men. So far, we’ve met Peter and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John, Philip and his good friend Bartholomew.

Today, we’re going to meet: Thomas. Our message is called, “Thomas, the Misunderstood Apostle”.

How is Thomas misunderstood? Because most people think of him by this title: “Doubting Thomas.” What do you think of when someone has the title, “Doubting”? I would think of someone who’s always skeptical. Someone that’s never on board with what you’re trying to do. Someone who always has a reason that you’re going to fail. A “wet blanket”. If you say, “We can do it”, a doubter says, “No, you can’t - Maybe you shouldn’t even try.” It’s the kind of person no one wants to have around. Nothing gets done if you have a doubter on your team.

Why do people think of Thomas that way? Because of the following story. Let’s set the stage: After a powerful ministry, Jesus was captured by the authorities. He was hauled away and eventually executed. His execution was not in a dark dungeon somewhere. His execution was very, very public. He was nailed to a cross in front of a big crowd and left there until he stopped breathing. Just to make sure, one of the executioners ran a spear through his body. Jesus was dead, all right.

But, a few days later, there was talk that he had come back - He had risen from the dead. There were even people that Thomas knew personally who said they saw him.

Here's how Thomas replied to the news:

So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25)

Now, understand, these were disciples of Jesus. They were good friends of Thomas. He spent almost three years with some of these people.

Imagine that: You've got good friends all telling you something happened. They're excited. They're absolutely certain they've seen it. For Thomas, none of that was good enough. It doesn't matter how much anybody pleads. Doesn't matter how much anyone tries to explain. He won't budge.

Today, if we think something isn't going to happen, we say, "I'll believe it when I see it." Thomas took it a step further. He said, "I'll believe it when I see it AND I can touch it. If I can't personally go up to Jesus, grab his hands and put my finger in the hole where the spear went in, forget it!"

So, Thomas doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead. And from that, he gets the famous name, "doubting Thomas." That seems pretty straightforward. But, is it fair? To find out, let's learn some more about this man.

We only learn about Thomas in John's gospel. Let's read about the first time John includes Thomas in his telling of the life of Jesus. In John chapter 11, we learn the story of Lazarus.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." (John 11:1-3)

Jesus gets some sad news. A good friend, who comes from a family of good friends, is sick. How does Jesus respond?

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." (John 11:4-7)

So, a good friend is sick. However, Jesus says, "This will not end in death." Everybody probably thinks, "Oh, good." They probably all think, "This person is going to get better. Great!" Even more, Jesus stays where he is for two days. Surely, there's nothing more to see here.

But then, after a couple of days, Jesus, says, “Let us go back to Judea.” So, there’s a sudden change of plan. And to the disciples, it’s a strange change of plan. Here’s why they think that:

“But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?” (John 11:8)

Lazarus and his family live in a place called Bethany. Bethany is suburb of Jerusalem. The last time Jesus was in that area, the authorities tried to have him killed.

A quick note: It says here, “The Jews.” Everyone here was a Jew. Jesus was a Jew. The disciples were all Jews. In local parlance there began to be a distinction between Jews who liked Jesus and Jews, usually those in authority, who didn’t.

To understand this, let’s look at a modern example. If you went to Iraq during the period of the “Gulf Wars”, and you asked people to describe an American, they would likely describe a soldier - A heavily armed man in a uniform. So, “American” would mean, “American Soldier.” Now, there are lots of Americans who aren’t in the Army, but that’s how things go. It’s the same way in the passage we just read, and in other places in the Bible. Those Jews in authority who didn’t like Jesus were often called, “The Jews.” That’s why, when I talk about this group, I usually say something like “The Jewish Leadership” or “The Religious Leadership.”

In any case, the Jewish leadership wanted Jesus dead. Going to a place where lots of them hung out would be a bad idea. And here’s a thought: It wouldn’t be such a good idea for any friends of Jesus. Maybe some of the stones aimed at Jesus might wind up hitting his friends?

So, the disciples of Jesus aren’t too keen on the idea of Jesus going to Bethany. Even more, didn’t he say that Lazarus would get better? What would be the point of Jesus being there?

There’s some back and forth about this, so Jesus has to be very clear:

So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” (John 11:14-15)

the disciples as a group don’t want to go anywhere near Jerusalem. They were skeptical about this idea. Jesus has to make it plain: “Lazarus is dead - “I’m going.”

But one voice stood out:

16 Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (John 11:16)

Let’s understand what’s happening here. The disciples as a group are skeptical of Jesus and his judgement. This is also known as “doubting.” It’s Thomas who says, “I’m on board.” And Thomas isn’t just a mindless cheerleader - He’s fully aware that what Jesus is going to do is

dangerous. He's fully aware that anyone who goes with Jesus could be killed. And even with all this, Thomas says, "Full speed ahead." Stated in another way, Thomas is saying, "Hey everybody, we all need to trust Jesus and follow him."

Does that sound like a doubter to you? Does that sound like a wet blanket? Does that sound like someone who's always looking for an excuse to derail whatever the team is working on? Far from being a doubter, at that moment, Thomas is the most faithful man in the group!

So, maybe the title, "Doubting Thomas" isn't fair? Maybe there's something more going on here that we need to investigate?

Let's learn more about this man. At one point, Jesus tells his followers about heaven.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going." (John 14:1-4)

At some point, we'll go into a deeper discussion about this great promise that Jesus makes to his followers. Heaven is not just a concept. It's not just an idea. It's a place. Jesus has prepared a place for us.

For now, let's concentrate on the way Jesus presented this to his followers. He says, "You know the way to the place where I am going." (v 4)

Thomas has a response to this, and his response gives us an insight into the way he looked at things and the way he thought:

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (v 5)

This is curious. To understand it, you have to understand some of the stories Jesus told. Here's one of the parables:

14 "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. 15 To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. (Matthew 25:14-15)

This is the story of "The Ten Talents." We'll run into it later as we study Matthew's book. Jesus told stories like this on several occasions. A rich man or a ruler would travel off to a far land. He would leave people behind to take care of his property. Then one day, the ruler would return.

In the story we just read from John's gospel, Jesus says he's going away. Here's the key: It looks like Thomas is thinking of a physical place. If you lived in ancient Israel, you knew about far away kingdoms to the east - Like Persia. Was Jesus going there? If you went the other way, if you went west, the furthest that anyone knew about was Spain, or some place in northern Africa. Was Jesus going there? To top is all off, Jesus says Thomas and the others are supposed to know where he's going. So, Thomas politely protests - He says, "Hey, we have no idea where you're going - You have to tell us." (Mathew 25:15)

What's Thomas's problem here? You see, Thomas is stuck in the here and now. Everything to him is somewhere on our physical world. He doesn't have the ability yet to think about higher realities. So, Jesus has to enlighten him. This is where Jesus shares one of the most quoted verses in the Bible:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

John is stuck on earth, so Jesus tries to redirect him to see heavenly realities. Sadly, Thomas isn't quite ready yet.

And that brings us back to the question of why Thomas didn't understand the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thomas was a man who had a rare opportunity. The Messiah, the long-awaited king came to Israel during the time that Thomas was alive. Thomas knew that the Messiah would fulfill prophecy. Jesus did that on numerous occasions. Thomas knew that the Messiah would be powerful. Jesus showed that to be true. Thomas was there with Jesus when he turned water into wine. Thomas was there when Jesus calmed a raging storm with a few words. Thomas saw Jesus heal terrible diseases and cast out demons. Thomas saw, and Thomas believed. He believed so powerfully that he was willing to follow Jesus to his death - Or so he thought.

But then, something happened. The soldiers came one night and took Jesus away. Everyone ran - Including Thomas. Along the way, a few of the disciples found ways to watch what was happening from a distance. We don't know if Thomas was one of them. We know that the apostle John was there to witness the crucifixion. We know that because John's gospel records that Jesus asked John to take care of his mother, Mary, who was also there watching. (John 19:25-27)

Maybe Thomas was there in the crowd, too? Maybe he said to himself, "But Jesus is going to come down from that cross. Maybe a whole angelic army will come." In the story of Samson, we're told that on one occasion, God gave Samson the power to kill hundreds of enemy soldiers with only a bone from a donkey. Maybe Thomas thought that if he prayed, God would empower him. Maybe he could punch one of the Roman soldiers and take his sword and take on the whole Roman army to save his friend. But, no. Thomas could only stand by and watch his friend suffer.

And then, Jesus stopped breathing. One of the soldiers shoved a spear into his side. The most disciplined person will do something when they get a spear shoved into their side. They'll cringe, they're call out in pain. But there was nothing – not a twitch. Jesus was dead. There was no doubt. Then, everybody went home.

We can only imagine how Thomas felt. He was surely devastated. Prior to this point, everything made sense. Now, nothing made sense. Everything in Thomas's world was now in question.

When people are devastated with some horrible loss, it does bad things to their thinking. Grief can cloud a person's thoughts. Sometimes, people can become very negative. Maybe Thomas began to doubt whether God existed, or that God was good? All the other disciples took some solace in each other. They were hiding together. But Thomas kept to himself. And that's sad, because only a few days later Jesus showed his followers one of the greatest miracles of history. He rose from the dead. Then, he appeared to his disciples who are all hanging around together.

But Thomas, because he isolated himself, wasn't there. Actually, that may have been a good thing. We're told in the story that Jesus waited another week to appear to Thomas. Why did he wait a week? Sometimes, God works in our lives with miracles. Sometimes though, he allows natural processes to do the work. Thomas may have needed some time by himself to work things out. When he was ready, God gave him a special miracle.

26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." (John 20:26-29)

Jesus gave Thomas a special appearance. Thomas demanded to see Jesus in person. Even though that was not a request made in faith, Jesus granted it. Thomas now had everything he asked for. How did he reply?

28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Prior to this time, Thomas had believed in a Jesus who lived only on this earth. Thomas had no ability to see eternal things. Now, he could see and understand heavenly realities.

What does this mean for us today?

So, what does this mean for us today? As I said, we've all felt misunderstood at some point in our lives. That was true for Thomas. He was misunderstood. People think of him as "doubting Thomas". Although he experienced doubt, it wasn't because he was fundamentally an unfaithful person. He went into a period of doubt because he had been devastated by a tragic loss.

Years ago, there was a psychologist named Alfred Adler. He noticed that many of his patients had suffered losses. However, they couldn't always put their feelings into words. So, he developed the following approach: He would ask people, "If you had a magic wand, and you could change any one thing about your life, what would it be?" Most people only need a few seconds to come up with one thing in their life that was very painful for them. It may have been a tragic loss. Or, they may have been horribly hurt or let down by someone. Maybe they made a big mistake. In fact, maybe it was they who let someone else down? Once people can put this experience into words, then they can begin to heal.

How about you? If I were to give you a magic wand, what is the one thing you would change about your life? Did someone let you down? Did someone hurt you? Did you make a big mistake?

Why does God allow things like that to enter our lives? For Thomas, it was the fact that he had a big problem: He couldn't really understand heavenly realities. It took a tragic experience to change. It took being devastated. But once that happened, God could use that experience to help Thomas. God helped Thomas to change from a man who was trapped on this world to a man who understood eternal truths. He understood that Jesus is not only Lord - Jesus is God. Jesus showed that by the power of his resurrection.

When Jesus went up into heaven, Thomas joined with the other Apostles. He went out into the world to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through him, untold numbers of lives were changed. He began to travel. At the end of those travels, he made it as far as India. There, so many people followed Christ, that there is still a church named after Thomas. To this day, there are people in India who trace their faith to Thomas.

Like the other apostles, Thomas had such great faith that he willingly faced death. On one occasion that reality came true. Thomas was attacked and run through with a spear. In one of the ultimate ironies of history, the man who would not believe until he could see the place where the spear went into the side of Jesus, was himself killed with a spear.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Thomas is a man who was misunderstood. He is thought to have been a doubter. However, he was not a doubter at heart – rather, he was a man of faith. It's just that his faith was limited. God used a devastating experience to help Thomas to change. He became something better.

God can do that with us, too. Have you had an experience in your life where you were devastated? Don't let it keep you from God. Rather than let it keep you down, invite God in to help lift you up.

Thomas believed because he saw something. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Perhaps that will be you?

May God help us to believe. May God help us to grow and change as Thomas did, as we continue to learn about his "Sent Ones."

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
www.TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:
PeaceWithGod.net