

Introduction

I'd like to take a little survey. How many of you have ever had any doubts about Jesus and His gospel? I'll raise my hand first because I've had them. We've all had doubts about Jesus and His gospel and the truth is some of us still do, which is why I'm preaching about what I am today. A **"doubting Thomas"** can become a **"believing Thomas"** and our text teaches us how.

What Doubt Is

Thomas is a well known disciple of Jesus and what occurred in our text is the reason he is. After His death and resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples, absent Thomas, in verses 19-23. When they met up with Thomas shortly thereafter, in verses 24-25, they told him Jesus was alive, but he doubted it. He said he'd have to touch His wounds from the crucifixion before he'd believe it. Eight days later, in verses 26-29, Jesus appeared to the disciples again and Thomas, inviting him to do what said he needed to do to believe, touch His wounds. Seeing was enough though, prompting him to cry out, **"My Lord and my God."** Jesus then replied, addressing the issue of belief, **"Thomas, you believe because you see. But blessed are My disciples of all generations who believe even though they don't see."**

I once overheard one Indians fan tell another, **"This is the Tribe's year."** The other answered, **"I'll believe it when I see it."** To which the first replied, **"You're such a doubting Thomas."** Our text explains what he meant. People have come to so equate Thomas with the doubt he expressed in it that an idiom developed around his name, **"doubting Thomas."** We call people that when they seriously doubt something.

You all know what doubt is but let me define it anyway. The root of the word **"doubt"** is the Latin word **"duo,"** which means **"two."** It has to do with the state of the mind. Let's think about belief, unbelief, and doubt in terms of that. **"Belief"** means to be **"in one mind"** about

something – to be certain it’s real or true. **“Unbelief”** also means to be **“in one mind”** about something – to be certain that it isn’t real or true. **“Doubt”** in contrast means to be **“in two minds”** about something – to be not certain that it is real or true or that it isn’t. Theologian Karl Barth explained it well: **“Doubt does not mean denial or negation. Doubt only means swaying and staggering between Yes and No.”**

That’s where Thomas was. He didn’t deny Jesus was alive. He said instead in verse 25, **“I’ll believe it when I see it,”** which left room for the possibility of it. That’s doubt, and as historian and New Testament Scholar Gary Habermas points out, it’s of two kinds.

One kind is what he calls **“factual doubt.”** This is uncertainty about a fundamental proposition or truth of Christianity. I once passed out a survey that listed twenty propositions, each of which was followed by one of three possible postures toward it: **“believe,” “disbelieve,”** and **“uncertain.”** One proposition was **“For Christians, life after death is better than life before death.”** Three of the respondents marked **“uncertain”** in that regard. That’s factual doubt.

A second kind is emotional doubt. This is uncertainty initiated by destructive feelings like discouragement, guilt, or fear. Those feelings usually rise from some negative circumstance, experience, or event. So, a Christian mother, going through the heartache of having a mentally ill son, said to me, **“I’m starting to wonder if God really is love.”** That’s emotional doubt.

Anyway, whichever kind of doubt it is, factual or emotional, the substance is the same. It’s uncertainty that something is real or true.

Doubt Is Dangerous

That’s doubt and it’s dangerous. It’s dangerous because of what it can lead to - unbelief. People sometimes consider their doubt to be a reflection on Jesus and His gospel and end up rejecting both as a result.

Charles Templeton was a tragic and classic case in point. He was a charismatic evangelist whose ministry exceeded that of his friend Billy

Graham. But he became a world renowned atheist, explaining why he did this way: **“I had gone through a conversion experience as an incredibly green youth. I lacked the intellectual skills and theological training needed to buttress my beliefs when – as was inevitable – questions and doubts began to plague me. My reason had begun to challenge and sometimes to rebut the central beliefs of the Christian faith.”**

Templeton illustrates that doubt can destroy people’s overall faith in Jesus and His gospel. But even if it doesn’t destroy it, it can weaken it so they forfeit the love, joy, and peace that normally accompany it. In light of that, our calling is clear. Deal with doubt! It’s dangerous and we need to deal with it. We deal with it by doing three things.

Identify Our Doubts

First, we identify our particular doubts. Many of us have sincere doubts about things but think we aren’t allowed to. We fear that we might not be Christians if we have them. Or we fear that others, if they find out we have them, might disrespect or even reject us. So, we conceal them, from others and ourselves, by keeping them hidden deep inside us. The result is we think we believe things that we actually doubt. It’s essential, therefore, that we identify our doubts. Logically, it’s the first step in dealing with them. We can’t deal with them if we don’t know we have them.

There is a practical way to identify our doubts. It’s by carefully examining what we feel and do. Doubts create and sustain accompanying feelings and actions. So, it’s in those very feelings and actions that we discover our doubts. We ask a question, **“What uncertainty would compel what it is that I’m feeling and/or doing?”** Our answer is our doubt.

Filled with anxiety about our financial situation when I was in law school, for instance, I told my wife, **“I trust God but . . .”** What uncertainty would compel the anxiety I felt and the statement I made?

It's the uncertainty that I'm beyond ultimate harm in God's hands (Romans 8:28). That was my doubt.

Or surveys show that 70% of Christians rarely read the Bible, 18 minutes or less a week. What uncertainty would compel their inaction? It's the uncertainty that the Bible gives the best information about the most important matters in human life. That is their doubt.

Doubts do give rise to accompanying feelings and actions. It's in those very feelings and actions, therefore, that we discover them.

Get Doubt Itself in Perspective

We deal with doubt by doing a second thing. We get doubt itself in perspective. We see it for what it is and for what it is not.

First, we see it for what it is – common. Let me share my opinion about Thomas. He's gotten a "**bad rap.**" Notice something in verse 21. The other disciples were huddled fearfully together in a secret and secured place. That implies that before they saw Jesus, they doubted He was alive just as Thomas did. And they believed because they saw, just as Thomas did. They had the same uncertainty he did in other words, which demonstrates that doubt is common.

Oz Guinness explains why it is: "**It (doubt) is not primarily a Christian problem, but a human problem The root of doubt is not in our faith but in our humanness.**" C.S. Lewis, who converted from atheism to theism to Christianity, shared a supporting observation in that regard "**Now that I am a Christian I do have moods in which the whole thing looks improbable, but when I was an atheist I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable.**" We can be sure of it. All thoughtful and objective humans, just because they're human, have times of doubt. To get doubt in perspective means to see it for what it is, common.

It also means to see it for what it is not – the opposite of belief. Remember the definitions of belief, unbelief, and doubt. They suggest that doubt isn't the opposite of belief. Unbelief is. Unbelief is the

willful refusal to believe something. It won't believe it because it doesn't want to. But doubt will believe it if it can. Unbelief is opposed to belief and thus, is its opposite. Doubt is not opposed to belief and thus, is not its opposite.

Grasp what that means. We can have doubts and still be Christians. Lee Strobel received a letter from a businessman he was considering for a leadership role in his church. It read: **"Lee, I need your help. I would like to feel confident. I wish I didn't have doubts, but I've got more questions than answers. Now, I'm beginning to doubt that I'm a Christian at all."** I share his letter because many Christians think what he did. Overall faith in Jesus and His gospel and doubts are mutually exclusive. So, if we have doubts, then we aren't Christians. But that isn't true. We can have doubts and still be Christians.

That then is the second thing we do to deal with doubt. Get it in perspective. See it for what it is – common. Also see it for what it is not – the opposite of belief. It's vital that we do. We'll be burdened if not destroyed by discouragement and guilt if we don't.

Inform Our Doubts

We do a third thing to deal with doubt. Inform our particular doubts. Let me ask you a question. Why do people have doubts about things? In my view, it's almost always because they lack knowledge.

Notice something in our text – why Thomas believed. Verse 29 explains it. He was presented with empirical evidence about what he doubted – that Jesus was alive. He actually saw, heard, smelled and felt Jesus. Knowledge, in other words, informed his doubt and drove it away.

It will do the same for us. Our knowledge of course is different than Thomas'. He saw but as Jesus said in verse 29, we don't. We can know enough though to believe. We can know in two ways.

One is by description. This is cognitive knowledge. It means that we understand things. We almost always have factual doubts for one or both of two reasons. We're uninformed or we're misinformed. But that

can be remedied. We inform our doubts. First, we study and gather facts about the subject of a particular doubt. Second, we infer other facts from those facts. And third we draw valid conclusions from all the facts. Those conclusions inform the doubt and drive it away.

At one time, for instance, I doubted that God is good because of all the bad things that happen to good people. But I began to observe and analyze things and became informed. Many more good things than bad happen to good and even bad people. And many bad things don't happen to good and even bad people. 1 out of 33 babies born in the United States, for instance, has a birth defect, which means that 32 out of 33 don't. In light of the complexity and array of natural processes pregnancy involves, it's a miracle they don't. That fact supports belief in the goodness of God. Knowing it and other facts, which is knowledge by description, informed my particular doubt and drove it away.

We can know enough to believe in a second way – by acquaintance. This is experiential knowledge like Thomas'. It means that we have an ongoing interactive relationship with Jesus. Our part in that relationship is to routinely engage Him through the spiritual practices I've explained many times before: solitude and silence, fasting, study, worship, prayer, purposeful obedience, lectio divina, and more. Those of us who do those things experience Jesus as objectively as the disciples and Thomas did when they actually saw Him. That experience informs our doubts, whether they're factual or emotional, and drives them away.

Conclusion

I close with the words of Thomas in verse 28, "**My Lord and my God.**" That is one of the greatest declarations of faith in the entire Bible. It shows that doubting Thomas became believing Thomas and the good news is that we can too. What are your doubts? Whatever they are, deal with them. Identify your doubts, get doubt itself in perspective, and inform your doubts. You'll be a believing Thomas if you do.