

119. In defense of a doubter

April 22, 2018

For centuries, one disciple of Jesus has been saddled with a label that has stuck with him. To many, the disciple Thomas has gone down in history as “the doubter.”

Doubt is not always bad. Oswald Chambers, early twentieth-century Scottish Bible teacher, said, “Doubt is not always a sign that a man is wrong. It may be a sign that he is thinking.” There is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is a matter of the mind. Unbelief is a matter of the heart. Doubt is when we cannot understand what God is doing and why He is doing it. But unbelief is when we refuse to believe God’s Word and do what He tells us to do. We must not confuse the two.

It has been said that doubt is the first step toward truth. It is the right of every believer to go through the halls of doubt on their way to rooms of truth.

An unbeliever has no intention of changing or believing. They will offer up the well-worn excuse, but the fact of the matter is that, even when confronted with evidence to refute their unbelief, they will reject it out of hand.

Yes, I am speaking in defense of a doubter that is in all of us. I’ve been following the Lord since 1987, 31 years. One thing I’ve learned is that whenever I don’t understand His ways or something from the Bible, I simply consider myself wrong. Because the Lord and His Word are always right without an exception. I ask Him to explain to me and wait – whether it is minutes, hours, days, or even years. He always meets me where my simple understanding resides.

A. THE DISCIPLES’ ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

John 20:19-23 Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 20 When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

It was the first day of the week which is Sunday. This is the reason Christian churches have their worship services on Sunday. The Seventh-Day Adventists insist that Christians should have a service on Saturday since it is the Sabbath, the day of rest according to the OT law. If they want to follow the OT laws in strict sense, they also should follow everything from the OT law, including the strict dietary laws and animal sacrifices, and including not traveling more than a mile on the day of Sabbath. They pick and choose.

The Sabbath was over when Jesus rose from the dead. There is no evidence in Scripture that God ever gave the original Sabbath command to the Gentiles, or that it was repeated for the church to obey. Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the church epistles in the NT, but the Sabbath commandment is not repeated, not even once.

574 Just a side note, at no extra charge: God the Father worked for six days and then rested. God the Son suffered on the cross for six hours and then rested.

Some Christians or self-proclaimed Christians who choose not to attend church services use a common excuse: "I don't have to go to church to worship God." They are absolutely correct, but at the same time they are not obedient to the Lord for what He said through the author who wrote the Book of Hebrews:

Hebrews 10:25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Let's go back to where the disciples were. The room is dark. With only a flickering oil lamp makes the disciples' shadows dance upon the walls which give them more eerie feeling in their stomachs. With the windows shut and the door barred, the disciples huddled together, afraid of what might happen to them in the near future. Then out of the blue, Jesus, their very dead Lord and Master stood in the middle of the room. If you were them, would you be scared? I would be. I am sure that there would be mixed emotions – joy and fear all rolled into one.

How did our Lord transform His disciples' fear into courage? For one thing, He came to them. Second, His first word to them was the traditional Jewish greeting, "Shalom (Peace be with you)!" He could have rebuked them for their unfaithfulness and cowardice the previous weekend, but He did not. Mankind declared war against God, yet He gives peace to those who believe in Him.

V21 was the formal ordination of a church order for the task of world evangelism. It is not a duty, rather it is a tremendous privilege and a great responsibility for everyone, not just a few.

The Lord Jesus just gave them a command to evangelize the world. Someone might say, "You mean that God is willing to risk His name on these 11 disheartened disciples to evangelize the whole world?" Yes, He was and look what these then-not-so-brave disciples of Jesus did to the whole world. We should not think that God would not care enough to equip us properly to do the work He wants us to do. Where God guides, God equips, ALWAYS. He is NOT looking for someone with all the right human credentials, rather He is looking for someone who is available to the Lord. He will do the rest.

In v22, these disciples finally received the Holy Spirit into their hearts because they believed in Jesus. See this, ladies and gentlemen? With the Holy Spirit in them, there is nothing they could not do.

Mark 10:27 But Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible."

In v23, we have a rather controversial verse. Does this verse mean that we or a special spiritual elite group of people can go around and tell people, "Oh yes, you are forgiven. But I don't like you, so your sins are not forgiven"? No, it is one of those verses that lost in translation.

Here is a literal Greek translation of v23:

"Those whose sins you forgive have already been forgiven; those whose sins you do not forgive have not been forgiven."

In other words, God does not forgive men's sins because we decide to do so, nor withhold forgiveness because we will not grant it. We simply announce it; we do not create it. This is the essence of salvation. And all who proclaim the Gospel are in

effect forgiving or not forgiving sins, depending on whether the hearer accepts or rejects the Lord Jesus as the Sin-Bearer.

Mark 2:7b Who can forgive sins but God alone?

The answer is "No one." The Roman Catholic Church has insisted that the apostles were here and they were given the right of absolution – the right to forgive sins. And that in the papal succession, Peter being the first Pope – so they say – and all the Popes after that also have the right of absolution of sins, that the Pope can forgive sins. An absolutely wrong doctrine. With that kind of false doctrine, the Popes can have a tremendous power over people.

B. DO YOU GET IT NOW?

Luke 24:36-49 Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, "Peace to you." 37 But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. 38 And He said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have." 40 When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. 41 But while they still did not believe for joy, and marveled, He said to them, "Have you any food here?" 42 So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. 43 And He took it and ate in their presence. 44 Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." 45 And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. 46 Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 And you are witnesses of these things. 49 Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high."

Though Jesus told them, "Peace to you," the disciples were still afraid. So He had to show them His nail prints on His hands and feet. The only work of a man now in heaven is the nail marks from the cross on the body of our exalted Savior.

Jehovah's Witnesses' own Bible 'New World Translation' renders the same way as our Bible in v39 and v41, however, they believe that the resurrected Jesus didn't have a physical body, but only a spirit. Their own doctrine contradicts their bible, but they still follow their false doctrines.

Does Jesus have a physical body like ours? Yes and no. Yes, He has a body with flesh and bones, but His body molecules are much different than ours that He can walk right through walls and doors. I don't know how to explain to you, but when I get that kind of body in heaven, I'll let you know.

Jesus even ate some fish and honeycomb. When you look at 'honeycomb' in the original Greek, it is chocolate chip cookies.

Let's go back to v45. Unless God opens our hearts, we cannot understand the truth from the Word of God. But to have God to open our hearts, we must come to Him with humility and the desire to learn from Him.

C. THOMAS' ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

John 20:24-31 Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." 26 And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" 27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." 28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." 30 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

We are not going to venture to guess why Thomas was not with his buddies. He could have been in Jerusalem Walmart for their Ham sale. Who knows? Since Thomas made a comment like that in his doubt, Jesus came to his faith level to help him believe. As I said it before, the Lord will help us with our honest doubt, but He will not accept any cynical unbelief.

Let's consider a few of the biggest sources of doubt:

1) How can God be in control when evil seems out of control?

When hardships lack reason or calamities defy justification, we tend to doubt God's divine purpose in our lives.

2) Does God care about our prayers?

Unanswered prayers can confuse us. When we pray for what we know is God's will according to Scripture and nothing happens, we wonder about God's goodness.

3) Is God fair?

Unfair treatment troubles us. When we do what's right and suffer for it, we question God's justice.

Thomas is a good warning to all of us not to miss a worship service on the Lord's Day. Because Thomas was not there, he missed seeing Jesus Christ, hearing His words of peace, and receiving His commission and gift of spiritual life. He had to endure a week of fear and doubt when he could have been experiencing joy and peace with the rest of the disciples. Remember Thomas when you are tempted to stay home from church on Sunday. You shouldn't come here to socialize or to do your religious duty, but to hear from God through His Word. You never know what special blessing you might miss, if you choose to ditch!

In v28, Thomas' response shows what we are supposed to say to the Lord Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" This takes us to the climatic words of John's Gospel in v31 – "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

D. APPLICATIONS

1) It is good to have faith that is based on solid evidence, but the evidence should lead us with the Word, and the Word should lead us to the Savior.

It is one thing to accept a doctrine and defend it; it is something else to have a personal relationship to the living Lord. The key is faith in the Word of God.

2) Where God guides, God equips.

3) Sometimes our greatest faith is on the other side of our deepest doubt.