



09

SESSION NINE

Thomas Doubted

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we learn about the nature of doubt and faith and how Jesus responds to those whose faith may waver. As we look at different kinds of both doubt and faith, we come to understand that faith is the assurance of our hope and the proof of what we cannot see. As believers, we are called to trust God with our own doubts and questions and to strengthen the faith of others.

SCRIPTURE

John 20:24-29

THE POINT

Faith is the assurance of our hope and the proof of what we cannot see.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

The Apostle Thomas has received harsh judgment over the years. We typically refer to the twelve disciples by their first names or with the title “Apostle”—as in the Apostle Peter or the Apostle John. Not so with Thomas. He is known as “Doubting Thomas.”

Some children’s songs include lines warning against being a “Doubting Thomas.” Even the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* has an entry for “Doubting Thomas,” defining the expression as “an incredulous or habitually doubtful person; someone who rarely trusts or believes things before having proof: a doubtful or skeptical person.”¹

But this nickname is not completely fair. A close look at the episode in which Thomas expressed his doubt also highlights his faith. We could just as well refer to Thomas as “Believing Thomas.” Still, his story helps believers today who struggle with doubt or who demand proof or evidence for what we believe. Furthermore, the way that Jesus responded to Thomas’ doubt guides us in showing patience to others who may struggle with doubt.

- **What are some doubts you’ve struggled with? In what ways do Thomas’ doubts and questions encourage you in your faith?**

Option 2

Place students into groups of two to four depending on how many students are in your group. Instruct the groups to think about three statements they can share with their group members: They should share two truths and one statement that’s completely made up. The catch: They have to make the lie sound realistic, because the other people in their groups will attempt to discover which statements are true and which one is a lie. Allow enough time for each student to present their statements. Then ask:

- **Was it difficult to identify which statements were true and which were lies? Why or why not?**
- **Were there any signs that helped you to know if a person was lying or telling the truth? Explain.**

Sometimes, the truth is difficult to see. Doubts can come from all different directions and make us ask questions. But asking questions isn’t a bad thing. Even the disciples had doubts and asked questions, asked for proof. This is how the disciple Thomas got the nickname “Doubting Thomas.” Thomas asked tough questions, but Jesus didn’t look down on him, rebuke him, or roll His eyes at Thomas’ questions. Instead, He gave Thomas the proof He sought. He restored Thomas’ faith through evidence of the truth. Asking questions when we doubt is often one of the key ways our faith is strengthened.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Faith is the assurance of our hope and the proof of what we cannot see.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus:** the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Thomas:** one of Jesus' disciples who wasn't with the other disciples during Jesus' first appearance; needed to see Jesus for himself in order to believe in the resurrection

PLOT

Have you ever doubted your Christian beliefs? Have you ever had questions that needed answering? Have you wondered whether or not your beliefs have any evidence or reasons to support them? If so, then you're certainly not alone. Many people experience doubt, and it isn't something to feel shame over. The disciple Thomas expressed doubts and wanted to consider the evidence. Instead of a harsh rebuke, Jesus graciously responded to Thomas and addressed his doubts.

TIMELINE

OVERCOMING DOUBTS

Thomas' doubts are satisfied when he sees and touches the risen Jesus.

FOLLOW ME

Jesus' forgiveness and the call of every Christian.

AS YOU GO...

Fulfilling the Great Commission wherever we are in life.

THOMAS DOUBTED JESUS' RESURRECTION

In today's passage Thomas, one of the twelve disciples, appeared for the third time in the Gospel of John.

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." (John 20:24-25)

For some undisclosed reason, Thomas was not present when the risen King appeared to His disciples on the day He was raised from the dead. When the other disciples claimed that they had seen the Lord, Thomas remained unconvinced and established a condition for belief. The condition was physical evidence. He needed to see and even touch the wounds of the risen Lord.

Like Thomas, all of us struggle with doubt in one form or another. Even believers in Jesus have moments of doubt. In fact, it has even been noted that there are different kinds of doubts, and that these different types of doubts can vary from person to person.

For some people, the doubts are intellectual. In other words, the doubter finds something about Christianity that seems to contradict with something in science, history, philosophy, and so on. This means some people must overcome intellectual hurdles before having assurance about the truthfulness of Christianity.

For others, doubts grow out of an emotional state. People may find it easy to doubt God and/or His goodness in their lives because of a tragic event or because of deep depression and anxiety. It is also important to note that emotional doubts often masquerade as intellectual doubts; however, when we get to the root issue, it becomes apparent that the doubter is experiencing emotional pain and frustration. Since the pain and frustration is emotionally based, intellectual answers offer little help to those struggling with emotional doubts. For emotional doubters, a pastoral response with biblical counseling is what is most often needed.

The third type of doubt is volitional, meaning the doubter makes a decision, or acts out of his or her own free will, to forsake the truth. Volitional doubt is essentially an unwillingness to obey. James refers to volitional doubt when he speaks of the indecisive or "double-minded" person (1:6-8). This kind of doubt can come from weak faith, stubbornness, arrogance, or a lack of repentance. For example, if a person is involved in an inappropriate physical relationship before marriage, then it would all of a sudden become "convenient" for that person to start doubting Christian teaching on purity and so on. We should take this kind of doubt seriously because it expresses itself in disobedience and rebellion.

THOMAS WITNESSED THE RESURRECTED JESUS

What does Jesus say to those with doubts? What is His response to those like Thomas who refuse to believe unless certain conditions are met? The next two verses in our study reveal Jesus' response:

26 Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although 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, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." (John 20:26-27)

Readers of the Gospel of John will experience a sense of déjà vu here. Jesus had appeared the exact same way a week earlier. The fact that eight days had passed signals that this was the following Sunday, what John would eventually refer to as "the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10). Jesus came through locked doors and offered the same greeting of peace, just as He did the previous Sunday. Then, He turned to Thomas and issued a challenge—maybe even a mild rebuke.

The preliminary part of the challenge was for Thomas to handle the evidence, thus seeing for himself that his condition for belief had been met. Jesus' offer provided proof that the "Word became flesh" (John 1:14).

The core part of the challenge Jesus issued to Thomas was this: "Don't be an unbeliever, but a believer." Thomas had been a loyal disciple of Jesus up to that point, but he needed to exercise faith in the crucified and risen King. Throughout the Gospel of John, we see that faith (belief) in Jesus is necessary for receiving God's salvation and gift of eternal life.

- **Why do you think Jesus singled out Thomas when He appeared to His disciples this second time?** (p. 61, PSG)

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Faith (p. 60, PSG)

Biblical faith is the resting, or trusting, in Christ alone for salvation (John 3:16-21). More than being simply a mental agreement of historical facts, genuine faith begins with a recognition and confession of the truth of the gospel (1 John 4:13-16), followed by a receiving of Christ as Lord and Savior of one's life (John 1:10-13). Biblical faith is not blind faith, for it rests on the historical life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

THOMAS CONFESSED THAT JESUS IS LORD AND GOD

This brief account has a wonderful resolution, as Thomas confessed his faith in the risen King. Take a look:

28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:28-29)

Thomas’ response was amazing—it was one of conviction and confession. His confession not only displayed faith in Jesus, the risen King, but also revealed who Jesus Christ is. Notice Thomas’ use of the terms “Lord” and “God” so close together. It’s important for us to note that in the Old Testament, “Lord” and “God” frequently stand side-by-side with reference to Yahweh. Simply put: Jesus is none other than God Himself!

But how do we understand Jesus’ response in verse 29? While Jesus affirmed Thomas’ faith, He also seemed to issue a slight rebuke. Or did He?

The second part of Jesus’ statement is what we call a *beatitude*—a *statement of blessing*. The most famous beatitudes Jesus spoke are recorded in Matthew 5:3-12. But here, after His resurrection, Jesus offered another. Rather than rebuking Thomas, Jesus anticipated a time when He would ascend to heaven and no longer be physically present on the earth. Once that happened, all those who believe would do so without the benefit of having seen their resurrected Lord.

This is our situation today. We do not see Jesus physically, in the flesh. We do not need to do so. Peter affirmed this by explaining to the churches that, even though we have not seen Jesus, we are still able to love Him and rejoice because we have received the goal of our faith: salvation (1 Pet. 1:8-9).

In fact, John would later reveal that he recorded certain events while deliberately leaving out others with one purpose in mind: so that we might believe Jesus was who He claimed to be and that we might have life in Him (20:30-31). In other words, John pointed to physical evidences and eye-witness testimony to support belief in the historical resurrection of Christ. While we may want the type of evidence Jesus offered to Thomas when He told Thomas to observe His hands and side, we can’t deny that Jesus has left us with other types of overwhelming evidence regarding His resurrection. And for those who look to the evidence—to Jesus—and believe, a blessing is given. How encouraging that Jesus’ response to doubters is not one of anger, but one of loving encouragement for those who doubt because the resurrection really took place.

- **We may not physically see Jesus and believe, but we have the evidence recorded in His Word. Which do you think would be easier, to be like Thomas and be able to base your belief off of physical sight? Or to be able to believe without seeing? Explain. (p. 62, PSG)**

TIMELINE

THE ASCENSION

Jesus promises to send His Spirit.

**Bonus Session*

SONG OF THANKSGIVING

Being grateful for God’s salvation leads to public proclamation.

**Beginning*

Winter 2017-18

PENTECOST

The Holy Spirit empowers the spread of the gospel.

CHRIST CONNECTION

It's not difficult to see Thomas' qualities in ourselves and others. Most of us will have mild doubts or try to answer our friends' tough questions. As we have learned, our doubts can be intellectual, emotional, or volitional (of the will). Whatever form, doubts cause a level of uncertainty within us that must be addressed.

Thankfully, we serve a Savior who welcomes those who have questions and doubts—One who calls us to believe, not in spite of the evidence, but because of the evidence. Christianity has never been about having a blind faith. Rather, it has always pointed to the historic resurrection of Jesus as grounds for believing. The Christian faith is a genuine faith because the object of our hope is real—Jesus Christ, our risen Savior.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Why do you think having doubts or asking questions can be a common experience, even for Christians?** *One likely answer is that doubts often come from the fact that we are not all-knowing (omniscient) creatures. Since we don't know everything, we sometimes lack certainty and confidence.*
- **Why is it important to distinguish between different kinds of doubt? How will your response to doubters change, based on the kind of doubt they express?** *Answering someone with intellectual doubts will be quite different from addressing emotional doubts or volitional doubts, and vice versa. For intellectual doubts, one would help the other person see the rationality and evidence of whatever it is they may be doubting. However, for emotional doubters, more of a pastoral response would be more effective because the doubting is rooted in something more emotional than intellectual.*
- **How does Jesus' response to Thomas both challenge and comfort those who doubt?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Who can you turn to with your doubts? Why is it important to have someone you can talk with openly about faith and doubts?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The words *believe*, *belief*, and *faith* in the New Testament come from the same word. In other words, to believe is to have faith and to have faith is to believe. But what exactly is faith/belief? It might be helpful to think about three aspects to faith. The first aspect is factual; it is agreement with the facts about Jesus and His provision of salvation. However, while faith is not less than mental agreement with the facts, it is more than that. After all, James says that while believing is great, even the demons believe (2:19).

- **Why is the factual part of faith important?** *For starters, it shows that faith neither contradicts actual evidence and physical support, nor is it blind belief in something despite the evidence. Instead, faith is reasonable and supported by the best evidences.*
- **How would you explain to someone that while important, factual faith isn't enough?** *Answers might include references to James 2:19 and so on.*



HEART

The second aspect of faith is emotional; it is a confidence in Jesus, as well as a love for Him. Of course, faith is more than a feeling. At times, even the strongest feelings of confidence and trust can waver, which is why faith is more than our emotions. However, this internal love and heartfelt confidence in God is part of genuine faith—Christians should not overlook it.

- **What is the danger of only paying attention to the emotional side of faith?** *If faith is only an emotion, what happens when those emotions change? What happens when people no longer feel the same way about Christ as they did the month before? What happens when their hearts grow a little cold? It is during these times that faith must be more than feelings alone.*
- **Read Romans 4:18-21. How was Abraham strengthened in his faith?** *Abraham was strengthened in his faith when he focused on the promises of God's Word, setting an example for how our faith and confidence in God can increase.*



HANDS

The third aspect of faith is volitional; it is an act of the will. Volitional faith is the decision to depend on Jesus each day, to exercise our belief in Him in all areas of our lives. It is the emotional and volitional aspects of faith that the demons lack. They cannot deny the truth, but they do not love it or willingly submit to it.

- **How would you explain or define faith to a friend who didn't grow up in church? What analogies or illustrations would you use to help a child understand biblical faith?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What can we learn from Jesus' response to Thomas about how to respond to doubters—both those who are already believers in Jesus and those who are not?** *At the very least, we should always welcome those with questions and never make people feel ashamed for asking questions they genuinely want to have answered.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCE

1. "Doubting Thomas," *Merriam-Webster*, accessed March 5, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/doubting%20Thomas>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRisenFAL17)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject