



Doubting Thomas by Carl Heinrich Block

Please read carefully the following three passages from the Gospels of John, Mark, and Matthew.

John 20:24-29

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, 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 the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' ²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, 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. Reach out

your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' 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 come to believe.'

Mark 9:14-29

¹⁴ When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶ He asked them, 'What are you arguing about with them?'

¹⁷ Someone from the crowd answered him, 'Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.' ¹⁹ He answered them, 'You faithless generation, how much longer

must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.’²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth.²¹ Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood.’²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’²³ Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.’²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’²⁶ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.²⁸ When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’²⁹ He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’

Matthew 14:22-29

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake.²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear.²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’²⁸ Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’²⁹ He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus.³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him,

saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Some Questions to Consider:

- 1) What is similar about the attitudes of all these people?
- 2) In each case, The Lord satisfies the needs of the people involved. Why do you think Jesus does this?
- 3) What is each person lacking in these passages?
- 4) How are these "empty places" filled by Jesus?
- 5) Having read these three passages, what do you think is necessary in order for all of us to increase our faith?

Now, what's different about the following set of circumstances:

Acts 19: 11-210

¹¹God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, ¹²so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them. ¹³Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, 'I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.' ¹⁴Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵But the evil spirit said to them in reply, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?' ¹⁶Then the man with the evil spirit leapt on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. ¹⁷When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised. ¹⁸Also many of those who became

believers confessed and disclosed their practices.¹⁹ A number of those who practised magic collected their books and burned them publicly; when the value of these books was calculated, it was found to come to fifty thousand silver coins.²⁰ So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

Some Reflections: In the 3 passages from the Gospels, each person who meets Jesus is afflicted with doubt. Yet in each case, Jesus nonetheless provides the solution to the person's problem. In John 20, Christ satisfies Thomas as to The Lord's resurrection. Jesus exorcises the demon from the mute child in Mark 9. And in Matthew 14, He saves Peter from drowning. But note the other accomplishment that is made in each of these three episodes. Jesus proves His divinity in all three cases by performing these miracles, thus strengthening the faith in all the people involved. Here is the "God-sized hole" concept we have talked about before. All of us have within us the need to believe in something or someone – and it needs to be someone other than ourselves. Until we have this hole in our being filled in, until this empty place in each of us has been "fixed," we can never really be whole.

As some of you know, I believe that Thomas gets a bad rap. While it's true that he comes across really badly here in John 20, thus developing the reputation of "doubting Thomas," don't forget that in John 11, it is Thomas who is more than willing to die with Jesus when the Lord makes the decision to go back to Judea, even though the Jesus are waiting there to kill Him (see Jn. 11:16). Johann Albrecht Bengel makes the point that what is going on in John 20 with Thomas's doubt is similar to what Nathaniel is going through at the beginning of the Gospel. In both cases, people are demanding "proof" that Jesus is who He says he is. This is, of course, a central part of the "enlightened" nature of man to have "scientific evidence" to justify his perspectives on the universe. However, some things in life require not so much their analysis as our belief!

It is also interesting that Jesus waits to confirm His resurrection to Thomas until “the eighth day” (see the RSV and ESV of Jn. 20:26). Could this be to initiate the concept the eighth day as being The Lord’s day? Robert Jamieson thinks so, and ties this verse to the opening of Revelation, and more specifically to Rev. 1:10 (see *Commentary on the Whole Bible* – Zondervan 1961, p. 1077). As I have told you before, the earliest Baptismal fonts were octagonal in shape (eight-sided) for exactly this reason.

I so identify with the mute boy’s father in Mark 9:24, when he cries out to Jesus, “[Lord], I believe, [but] help my unbelief.” This actually is tied to the passage from Matthew 14 where Peter walks on water. Note how Peter has his moment of doubt as well, just like the mute boy’s father from Mark 9. But, by recognizing their own faults and therefore reaching out to the only one who is completely flawless and therefore able to save us broken people, the people in these accounts are reunited with God, and the “God-sized hole” in each of these accounts is thus filled.

This leads us necessarily to the account from Acts 19. The setting of this passage from Acts is important. Ephesus was a place noted for necromancy and the performance of the black arts. In fact, Ephesus had developed such a reputation for magic that books on necromancy at this time were often called “Ephesian Scrolls” according to the footnotes in Oxford Annotated edition of the RSV. So the sons of Sceva really had no intention of fostering a faith in The Lord when they were invoking the name of Jesus. They were only relying on this as one more “trick” in their personal tool box of black magic.

So it is with us. When we rely on our own tool box of personal strengths and human qualities, we are bound sooner or later for failure. Only when we rely on the limitless resources of God can we hope for ultimate victory in this life and in the next. JWB+ 4/28/16