



*Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us*

WEEK 44

THOMAS & JUDAS

OCTOBER 29 - NOVEMBER 2, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	John 11-12, Psalm 66	John 11:1-17, 14:1-12, Psalm 66
Tuesday	John 13-14, Psalm 67	John 20:19-29, Psalm 67
Wednesday	John 15-16, Psalm 68	Matt 10:1-4; 26:1-30, 46-50, Psalm 68
Thursday	John 17-18, Psalm 69	John 6:65-71; 12:1-8; 13:16-30; 18:1-11, Psalm 69
Friday	John 19-20, Psalm 70	Mark 14:17-50; 66-72, Psalm 70

READ

John 11:1-17

John 14:1-12

Psalms 66

REFLECT

This week we consider two men with negative reputations. We will spend two days on “Doubting Thomas,” and three on Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus.

All four Gospels agree in listing Thomas as one of the Twelve Apostles that Jesus chose, and Acts 1:13 as one of those gathered with the early Church. His name means “twin” in Aramaic, and sometimes the Greek word for twin, “Didymus,” appears as well. It is the Gospel of John that recounts the stories by which we remember him.

The first account that includes Thomas comes toward the end of Jesus’ preaching ministry, just before Palm Sunday. Jesus has heard that His friend Lazarus has fallen sick, in Judea. Even though He has just left Judea because of a threat to His life (John 10:30-39), Jesus declares His intention to go back. The disciples together raise objections to this journey back into danger (v. 8). The reply of Jesus is somewhat enigmatic – “If anyone walks in the day he does not stumble” – but the point is that since He walks in the “light” – the Father’s will – He has nothing to fear. It is Thomas who reacts: “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.” It’s not a whole lot to go on for discerning a personality, but we can say it does show courage, and a certain team spirit, as well as maybe a realistic cast, since he seems to assume that all this talk of “light” may be over-optimistic, and Jesus is likely to die. (He turns out to be right about that.)

The second account comes after supper on the night Jesus was betrayed, during Jesus’ “farewell discourse” recorded by John (ch. 14-16). Jesus begins by stilling the doubts (!) in all His disciples’ hearts,

encouraging them to believe in Him and the way He is going. It is Thomas who answers first: “Lord, we do not know where You are going. How do we know the way?” The question is respectful but forthright. It again shows Thomas as expressing the concerns of the whole group, though perhaps in a sharper form than others might have put it. Thomas’ frankness allows Jesus to articulate one of His greatest disclosures: “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.” Philip then picks up the interrogation, and gets more heat from Jesus than Thomas did for it. For our study of Thomas himself, so far, he seems to be no solitary doubter among believers, but rather one of a group with deep concerns about their enigmatic leader, one willing to voice those concerns in a constructive way.

The third story is that of his famously stubborn doubting of the resurrection itself, and we will take time to look at it tomorrow. For the moment, we will observe that in these stories Thomas appears as someone who *believes* in Jesus, with an openness that is willing to bring sharp questions from within the bonds of love and trust.

RESPOND

Let me suggest a working definition of doubt, as “our natural reaction when reason is offended.” There is much about the Christian Gospel that offends reason. But the deep Reason for Jesus’ mission – that is, the love of God who chose to redeem us from sin – explains much of the offense. And it allows us to believe that the answers to other questions will also be found in the deeper will of God. When those questions become pointed and sharp, however, through circumstances, or personal difficulties, or the challenge of ministry to others, then we need to accept the good example of Thomas, and ask the right person or persons for help with an answer. Such is faith, not doubt.

PRAY

Dear Lord, Thank You for Your love, and for Your personal presence with us this day. It is in You that we believe, and You that we follow, as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

READ

John 20:19-29

Psalm 67

REFLECT

The best-known story about Thomas takes place just after the resurrection of Jesus (John 20). Peter and John, “the beloved disciple,” have visited the tomb, and have found the grave clothes laid aside. Of the two, John is said to “believe” what he sees (20:8). Mary, who was the first to arrive, lingers after they have gone, grieving over what she assumes is desecration of the tomb. Jesus encounters her, and brings her out of her darkness and into the joy of faith in the unbelievable: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (20:11-18). Mary, the first one actually to see Jesus alive, runs and tells the others “I have seen the Lord!” (20:19). The reaction of those gathered is not recorded, but apparently their own moment of belief comes only later. That evening Jesus comes and stands in their midst, and shows them His wounds; the text tells us that “therefore” they believed (20:20). Thomas has been away, but returns apparently the same night, and they tell him echoing Mary’s words: “We have seen the Lord!” (20:25). It makes about as much of an impact on him as Mary’s words had made on them, and he articulates his skepticism: “Unless I see the imprints of the nails in His hands, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.”

Thus Thomas the skeptic. He is not really a doubter, in the sense of hanging on to unbelief; he says he is willing to believe, but thinks that he has certain conditions that must be met. In all fairness, he is only asking for the opportunity everyone else has already been given (all except John, who “believed without seeing” Jesus).

Wonderfully, eight days later Jesus appears again among the disciples, willing to fulfill the very conditions Thomas has placed on Him. I think it’s very rare to get that sort of compliance from God! But Jesus

complies, inviting Thomas to touch Him. We do not in fact read that Thomas had to touch Him in order to believe; the encounter itself seems to have been decisive. And the response of Thomas is remarkable; in recognizing Jesus as “my Lord and my God” he speaks “the supreme Christological pronouncement of the Fourth Gospel” (R. E. Brown) – that is, his new faith sets a standard for all the rest of us to follow.

On the one hand, as we read about Thomas we do probably recognize something of a personality type. I can think of several good friends who cultivate what they consider to be a healthy critical distance toward the wonders of life, but who are more passionate than most about the wonders that they have actually come to accept. On the other hand, Thomas is close enough to the center to represent something that is in us all, namely, a threshold that something “out there” must cross before we are willing to take it seriously, and make it a part of our lives.

The traditions of Thomas’ later life reflect his powerful and forthright faith. He is said to have been the only apostle that took the Gospel to the east of Palestine, founding churches that developed in Persia and India. India’s Mar Thoma (“Saint Thomas”) Church is one that traces its existence back to Thomas the Believer.

RESPOND

God is willing to meet us where we are, as the people we are; the story of Thomas is clear on that. It is also clear on the fact that we will be changed in the encounter. Psalm 67 asks that “the face of God shine on us, that Thy way become known to the nations.” Surely this was fulfilled, in part at least, in the upper room with Thomas. Are you willing, as Thomas was, to be met by the Lord, and to be transformed for service?

PRAY

Dear Lord, thank You for Your loving presence this day, and for the things You have called us to do today as an expression of Your love.

- D.D.

READ

Matt 10:1-4; 26:1-30, 46-50

Psalm 68

REFLECT

We begin reflection on the figure of Judas Iscariot by looking at relevant passages in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew lists Judas as one of the Twelve Apostles (as do all the Gospels) and as the one who was to betray Jesus. Right away, then, we are faced with the enigma that one of the men that Jesus personally selected was eventually to hand Him over to His enemies.

The story of the betrayal itself begins with Jesus' approach to Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus raises the issue of His betrayal before Judas does, and even before the priests and elders begin to plot (26:1-5). After His anointing in Bethany, at which He again prophesies His own death (26:12), we have the account of Judas initiating the betrayal (26:14-16). At least part of his motive is greed, as is clear in the question he asks the priests, and in his acceptance of the thirty pieces of silver. But in the process of the arrest and trial Judas' perspective shifts for some reason, and his clumsy return of the coins (27:3) points to a more complicated motivation than mere greed.

Judas is valuable to Jesus' enemies because he can help with a quiet arrest (26:5). They don't care about his motive; they want him for opportunity. And it goes fairly smoothly, as Judas brings the arresting mob gathered by the priests to a place Jesus was accustomed to pray. Identifying Him with a kiss, Judas has done his work. It is pretty much down hill from there for him, as he falls apart and, getting no help from his partners in crime, finally commits suicide (27:3-10).

How do we make sense of the story of Judas? May I say right away that I don't think it is possible to make sense of Judas just by looking at Judas. He is contrary and conflicting in many ways, not in the sense of being unbelievable as a character, but in the sense of being finally

inscrutable and closed to us. We all know people who, try as we might, we can't figure out. And there are those who will say the same about us! Sometimes those walls can come down through careful mutual sharing and listening. But in other cases walls remain. Judas, for me, is Judas in large part because he has closed himself off on every side from open relationship, including relationship with God. He is the ultimate inscrutable and closed person. So I must be at peace with the fact that I cannot make good sense of Judas.

I think we can, though, make sense of Judas' *story*, as something that was necessarily a part of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. Even as the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, showing the resistance of secular humanity to God, was necessary to bring about the great miracle at the Red Sea, so the hardness of heart seen in Judas and his cohorts was necessary to bring the Son of God to the Cross. It was not an artificial thing; the hatred of humans is real in every generation, though it masks itself more effectively in some cultures and seasons. In Judas and his partners, the actual face of human sin was boldly revealed in its nakedness, in a very timely way. "The Son of Man is to go just as it was written of Him; but woe to that man through whom the Son of Man is betrayed!" (26:24)

RESPOND

Judas' darkness was not too dark for Jesus to dispel, but he turned to the chief priests instead, and lost his hold on life. As we allow the Light of the World to shine on our own hearts, and as we open to others who are in the light, we can be assured of meaningful lives lived in the life of the One who conquered death and hell. He died, and rose, and lives forevermore!

PRAY

"Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears our burdens, the God who is our salvation. God is to us a God of deliverance, and to God the Lord belongs escape from death." Psalm 68:19-20

- D.D.

READ

John 6:65-71; 12:1-8; 13:16-30; 18:1-11
Psalm 69

REFLECT

Looking at the passages about Judas in the Gospel of John, we see that the puzzle of this story gets both a little more explained and a little more mysterious. John 6 recounts how a huge crowd dwindles to just a few people as Jesus challenges them with the reality of His mission. His preaching looks like a failure. The Twelve hang in there with Him, though Peter seems less than enthusiastic: “Where else can we go?” Jesus gives the final ironic comment on this low point in His mission: even one of the ones He chose is “a devil.” As Christians, we know Jesus is really wrestling with the whole reality of sinful humanity. His toleration of Judas is part and parcel of His mission, and His Lordship.

In John 12, the story of Mary anointing Jesus gives us the additional detail that Judas was treasurer of the resources of the group, and that he objected to Mary’s lavish use of the perfume because he was pilfering the money box (12:6). This confirms the suggestion of greed we saw in Matthew’s account, and reveals Judas as definitely off-target.

In John 13, at the Last Supper, Jesus’ washing of His disciples’ feet is undertaken explicitly against the background of Judas’ betrayal (13:2-4); Jesus’ love and faithfulness is in direct contrast to the abandonment of Judas. Later at the table He privately lets Peter and John know the identity of the betrayer using a sop of bread, and He actually dismisses Judas from dinner to fulfill the work of betrayal (13:27-29). The account of the betrayal and arrest accentuates the power and will of Jesus in this event, and the pale weakness of the arresting group. He identifies Himself as they fall back unable to arrest Him; Judas is practically a nonentity in the background. The last word is given by Jesus Himself: “The cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?” (18:11). Yes, there is an arrest, and Judas is there somewhere, but Jesus is fully in charge of things.

Here it is clear that the story of Judas is really a story about the Lordship of Christ. Judas has something of a motivation and character, but he seems to dwindle and collapse as Jesus’ glory grows greater at the onset of the Cross. Greed finally does not explain his actions; greed is rather another symptom of the underlying disease that leads him to plot Jesus’ murder. Some have wondered whether Judas’ motive was jealousy, that he wished that he could have been “the beloved disciple.” Others opine that Judas expected a political messiah, and Jesus was a disappointment to him. Recently it has been suggested that Judas meant to do Jesus the favor of bringing the opposition to a head; he betrayed Him out of friendship and sympathy with His mission. The problem with all of these suggestions is that they are not suggested in our biblical text. They probably then represent the projections of the scholars, projections of personal assumptions about the nature of sin and evil. Our Psalm today suggested to Jesus the most chilling motive of all for opposition to His love: “They hated Me without cause” (Psalm 69:4; John 15:25).

Judas will always probably be a screen upon which folk will project their own fears and biases. He really doesn’t generate much of story at all, on his own. Judas is the shadow. Jesus is the story – the very, very, very good story indeed.

RESPOND

The enigmas and puzzles of the world we live in can be very complex, and we can sometimes get pretty obsessive about them – as in the need to *explain Judas*. But by taking our cue from Jesus and His call upon us, we can differentiate between the problems that we ought to be solving, and those that are less strategic. It is a far better thing to be ready to *explain the good news of Jesus* to someone hungry to hear it.

PRAY

Jesus, Thank You for the gift of Your life, and joy, and work. We have no cause to refuse You, and every reason to follow You.

- D.D.

READ

Mark 14:17-50; 66-72

Psalm 70

REFLECT

On this final day reflecting on Judas, I would like to look at what I think to be the pressing spiritual question for Christians as we consider Judas' role. Perhaps at some point each of us ends up asking the question, "Lord, is it I?"

This is the way the disciples responded to Jesus, in Mark's account of the Last Supper. As He reclined with them at the start of the meal, He said that one of them would betray Him. They reacted by looking inward, needing to be reassured by Jesus that they would never do such a thing. Jesus allows the questions to hang in the air, permitting the tension of self-examination to continue. But He leads them into communion, and the promise of His presence.

But as the account continues to unfold, it is clear that Judas is not the only example of failure in this group. Jesus warns them that they will all soon be running off (14:27), which prompts Peter to insist that he will never deny Jesus. For the rest of the chapter, Mark alternates scenes between the trial of Jesus and the temptation of Peter. Judas is in fact forgotten in the drama of Peter's failure and remorse. In this way Mark provides the short answer to the question, "Lord, is it I?" The answer: don't be a Judas, when you can be a Peter.

What are the differences between Judas and Peter? First, as many notice, there is the remorse of Peter and his weeping (14:71). But how is this different from Judas' suicidal despair? Paul helps us with a comment in 2 Corinthians 7:10: "For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces repentance without regret leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death." Clearly Judas' sorrow was a worldly despair resulting in death. It was Peter who sorrowed in the light of God's loving will, and it led him to "repentance without regret leading

to salvation." Peter repented and found forgiveness; Judas simply abandoned the Lord.

There is another difference as we look at these two, namely, once Judas left he never returned, but Peter remained in the sphere of Jesus' influence. He followed Him even into the camp of the enemies; in a sense, he was the most faithful of the Twelve. The value of this is that when he came to the point of failure, Jesus' word to him could nevertheless be a life-giving support and reality. He could remember that his very weakness was foreseen by Jesus; the crowing rooster proved not only Peter's weakness but Jesus' prophetic love. Further, that at this moment "the Lord turned and looked at Peter" (Luke 22:61). The point is that *Peter remained positioned even in failure to see and hear the Lord, and to be touched by Him*. So be a Peter: the rewards are infinite and everlasting.

RESPOND

In our church, we emphasize a number of ways to "remain positioned to see and hear the Lord." We encourage regular Sunday worship, with all the opportunities it brings to hear, speak, sing, and even eat and drink the love of God. We emphasize the value of regular daily Bible study, and personal response to His word. We emphasize involvement in small groups, where we can carry each others' burdens, and be stimulated each by the other to fresh Christian love and joy. And we emphasize involvement in the ministries of Glenkirk, both as we may need to rely on the help of committed leaders, and as we also need to become involved in ministry for others. Too much of an agenda for Judas to have put up with – but Peter would have understood it very well.

PRAY

Lord, We pray today with the Psalmist: "Let all who seek Thee rejoice and be glad in Thee; and let all those who love Thy salvation say continually, 'Let God be magnified.'" Psalm 70:4

- Dave Dorman

