

The Doubters

The Master Disciple Maker – Part VI

Selected Scripture

Introduction

Earnest Hemingway was wounded in the First World War. I have read that doctors picked two hundred thirty seven pieces of shrapnel from his body. It was amazing that he lived through the experience. It marked him for the rest of his life. However, it was not necessarily the pain of that experience that he remembered, it was the fact that he had come so close to dying in combat. He would derive from his experience, a formula – a formula that would find its way into his writings. If you have ever read Earnest Hemingway, you have seen this formula. He would write of a man and place him in an impossible situation. Then, he would allow that impossible situation, not to make that man, but to reveal to the reader what that man was really like.

I have found in studying the disciples that Jesus, perhaps, used this formula. In fact, He was the originator of the idea. He would take His disciples, place them in impossible situations, and then, watch and wait to see, not that they were necessarily developed, but what they were really like.

Two disciples that Jesus placed in impossible situations came out of their experiences similarly – as zeroes. They came out in such a way that we now know of them as “the doubters”. These men were faced with impossible situations in which it seemed that nothing could happen that happened. Jesus Christ would reveal this to them and then, disciple them through it.

Now I will lay the groundwork first. Then, I will move to the application of this to our lives.

Philip

Let us begin by taking a look at the disciple Philip in light of this introduction.

1. Turn to John chapter 6, which is a familiar passage on the feeding of the five thousand, and notice that Jesus picks on Philip.

Look at John 6:5.

Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a great crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip “Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?”

Philip may have been in charge of the food. We do not know, but I think he was because his answer will come back so quickly.

Continue to John 6:6.

This He [Jesus] was saying to test [reveal] him [Philip], for He Himself knew what He was intending to do.

Jesus’ question to Philip had nothing to do with, “Where are we going to buy bread?”

Philip’s answer will have everything to do with how much it will take to feed this crowd of more than 5,000 people. He came up with a mathematical formula. I think the reason he knew was because he was probably in charge of the food. We read Philip’s answer in John 6:7.

Philip answered Him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them . . .

A denarii was worth about seventeen cents on today’s market. We know, from the history of that day and time, that one denarii could buy about thirty-five barley loaves. A barley loaf would fit in the palm of a hand.

Philip had figured it all out. Before Jesus had even asked, his little analytical, mathematical mind was working it out. He answers, “Lord, two hundred denarii, or seven thousand barley biscuits, would not be enough to feed this crowd.”

Philip was so overwhelmed with the impossibility of the situation that he overlooked the supernatural resources of Jesus Christ. He saw the size of the problem, but did not take into account the size or the power of his Master’s ability.

I think Christ was trying to reach Philip about faith. He was trying to tell him that all things are possible. When we read further in this text, we see that Jesus did not even respond to Philip. He simply

had the people sit down and then, broke the bread and the fish and fed them all.

You might think I am being a little hard on Philip. However, there are a couple of other incidents that showed Philip's doubt. We will briefly look at one of them.

2. Turn to John chapter 12 and notice Philip's reaction to some Greeks who come to see Jesus.

Look at John 20:20-21.

Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship . . . these then came to Philip, . . . and began to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

When some Greeks come to see Jesus, who do they go to? They go to see Philip. Philip is really flustered and does not know whether Jesus will want to see the Greeks.

Continue to John 20:22.

Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus.

Philip then runs to Andrew and asks him. We previously studied that Andrew brought these men to Jesus.

What is Philip's problem with these Greeks? The problem is that earlier in His discipling ministry, Jesus Christ had said, "We're not going to the house of the Gentiles or the Greeks. We are going to the house of Israel." (Matthew 10:5-6)

Philip, having the kind of personality that he had, went exactly by the book in every situation – and he remembered Jesus' statement. So when the Greeks came, he overlooked the spectrum of God's grace and said, "Jesus wouldn't want to see the Greeks. Didn't He say and isn't it in black and white somewhere concerning the Greeks? Isn't this the way Jesus operates?"

When we put these incidents together, we discover a personality that is skeptical and analytical in a person who probably was a pessimist. Philip was an individual who saw the problems without seeing the power of Jesus Christ.

Thomas

Let us take a look at another disciple that we know as a "doubter". We know him fairly well – his name is Thomas. In fact, we usually run to him when

we want a sermon on doubting. We will look at several instances in which Thomas speaks.

1. Turn to John chapter 11 for one incident in which Thomas speaks.

Jesus, along with His disciples, has just left Jerusalem because there was a plot to take His life. The plot was becoming more pronounced, but Jesus knew it was not His time to die. He receives the news that Lazarus has died. He says to the disciples, "Let's go to Lazarus."

Now Lazarus is in Bethany. Bethany is two miles east of Jerusalem, so Jesus is walking back into a trap; back into an arena where those who want to kill Him will be able to kill Him. The disciples are panicking. Look at John 11:8.

The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?"

Look at John 11:11.

. . . He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep."

I love the disciples response, in John 11:12. They show such courage!

The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."

In other words, "Lord, Lazarus will wake up; he'll recover on his own. Don't risk our lives or Your life."

Now Thomas is standing somewhere and listening to this conversation between Jesus and the disciples. He takes it all in and then, comes out with a classic statement.

Look at John 11:16. The word "Didymus" that is used in this verse, by the way, means "twin". Perhaps Thomas had a twin brother or sister.

Thomas therefore, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him."

Let me give two things to note about this statement by Thomas.

- Number one, notice Thomas' courage.

Yes, notice Thomas' courage! We usually overlook the fact that there was a streak in this man that was very courageous.

An optimist, by the way, is not necessarily courageous because he always expects the best. The

fact that an optimist sees only the good and says, “Let’s go and it will be wonderful,” does not necessarily mean he has courage.

A pessimist anticipates the worst. Thomas was pessimistic, but he still said, “Let’s go.”

This is courage. It is the individual that expects the worst, yet still moves into action, who is displaying courage.

- Number two, note Thomas’ pessimism.

We cannot overlook Thomas’ pessimism, however. Did you notice what he said? Look again at his statement in John 11:16b.

... “Let us also go, so that we may die with Him.”

Who said anything about dying? Jesus did not say, “We’re going to go to Bethany to die.”

Thomas just assumed that this was what was going to happen! He says to the other disciples, “Let’s go die with Him.”

Thomas, the doubter himself, was being analytical and was assuming the worst.

2. Turn to John chapter 14 for another instance in which Thomas speaks.

Let us begin by looking briefly at the familiar words that Jesus says to His disciples. Look at John 14:2b-4.

... I go to prepare a place for you. ... I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.

Thomas is the one who speaks up. Look at John 14:5.

Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?”

Thomas probably jumps out of his chair and says, “Lord, I’m not sure where You’re going and I don’t know how to get there.”

This is the way many of us are or were in school. The teacher says something that we think is important, so we raise our hand and say, “Do I need to know that for the test?”

In other words, “I don’t want to miss anything important.”

Thomas is sitting there and it sounded to him like Jesus said something important. He comes out of his

chair, “Wait a second! I don’t know all the facts. I don’t know how to get there. I’m not sure where You’re going.”

Thomas thinks Jesus is going to leave him behind.

3. Thomas speaks again in John chapter 20.

John 20 is the passage to which we typically look to see Thomas as the doubter. Jesus, in John 19, is crucified and dies. I would assume that Thomas and Philip are shattered. We can almost hear them saying, “Oh, I knew it would happen. The worst has occurred – Jesus is dead. He went somewhere and we don’t know where He went. We’ll never go there. How would we go there? We don’t know how. We’ll never see Him again.”

Finally, Jesus appears to the disciples. in John 20:19-22.

So when it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you.” And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus continues then, to instruct these disciples a little further.

Where is Thomas? Skip to John 20:24.

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.

I am going to imply that something was going on in this man’s life that caused him to exclude himself from fellowship with his fellow believers.

The other disciples are worshipping together. They are frightened and fearful, yet they are together in the upper room. It is at that moment that Jesus will appear to them. As a result, they will be warmed and filled with His presence.

So where is Thomas? He is doing what we so often do when we are overwhelmed with grief and sorrow. We shut ourselves up somewhere; we box ourselves in a closet.

Why do we respond in this way to the fellowship of the saints? It is usually the first thing we turn away from. When we are overwhelmed with sorrow; with difficulty, it is within all of us to hide somewhere; to get away from people.

Perhaps it is because of this that Thomas misses the first appearance of Jesus Christ – the appearance in which Jesus comes into the upper room and says, “Peace be with you.” Thomas misses it all.

Pliny wrote about the meetings of the early Christians. He was writing to Trajan, the Roman Emperor, when he wrote, “Trajan, they are given to meet together on a stated day before it is light. And they sing among themselves alternately a hymn to Christ as God. What sweet fellowship.”

Thomas, perhaps overwhelmed with the grief of the crucifixion and death of his Lord, has abandoned the fellowship. As a result, he misses the appearance of Christ.

Now Jesus comes back on the next Lord’s day. This implies that He is honoring that day of worship and that He is honoring the meeting together of the saints. He comes back eight days later, which is the Lord’s day. Jesus says basically, two things that we will note.

Look at John 20:26a.

And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. . . .

This time, Thomas is there. The disciples have told him of Jesus’ first appearance. Although Thomas does not believe them, he comes this time. Look back, in fact, to John 20:25.

So the other disciples therefore were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.”

In other words, “I must have proof. I have to see it. It’s got to be in black and white or I can’t abandon my life to that.”

So Jesus comes again. Note two things that He says.

- Number one, notice Jesus’ salutation.

In John 20:26b, Jesus says,

. . . Peace be with you. . . .

When the Battle of Marathon had been fought and Greece crushed the power of Persia, a story is told of one warrior in the battle named Pheidippides. When they won the war, he threw down his sword and shield and ran like the wind toward Athens. He finally reached Athens, burst through the gates, and ran to the Acropolis, where he exclaimed, “Rejoice, we conquer!”

This word “rejoice” is the word “charitoo” in the Greek. When Jesus Christ appeared to His disciples, He stood in their midst and chose a word from the Greek vocabulary. What word did He choose? “Charitoo”. This choice of words implies that He is saying, “Rejoice, I have conquered.”

I imagine Jesus’ disciples were electrified by His presence. Thomas was probably running for the corner, very embarrassed by his own lack of faith.

- Number two, notice the patience of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is kind and merciful to a dull and slow believer. He knew what Thomas had said eight days ago. Now, in John 20:27a, without addressing any other disciple, He speaks directly to Thomas.

Then He said to Thomas, “Reach here your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; ...”

I cannot imagine that there was any more tiresome and provoking conduct than that of Thomas. If I had been Jesus Christ and appeared on the scene, I would have said, “Thomas, you’re an embarrassment to Me and to the cause. Why are you so faithless?”

I probably would have given Thomas a lecture he would never forget. That is the way I would disciple. However, Jesus Christ accommodates the faithlessness of His disciple by coming into the room and saying, “Thomas, here I am. Look. See. Touch. Know.”

Then Jesus continues and says a rather interesting phrase to Thomas, in John 20:27b,

. . . and do not be unbelieving, but believing.

This is a command that we would say, “That’s easy for You to say, Jesus. We are to just stop being faithless; stop being an unbeliever in the sense of Your power and simply start believing?”

Let me say, men and women, Jesus never commands a disciple to do something that He is not capable of doing. It is possible for every one of us to move from the realm of lacking faith; from the realm

of analytical skepticism into the realm of great faith; that is, to believing everything there is to believe about Christ. It is possible.

Three ways God develops faith

Now let us stop at this point for a moment and talk about this kind of faith. There are many misconceptions about it.

I would say, first of all, this faith is a gift from God. Faith is not something you have drummed up, it is a gracious gift from God.

The scriptures tell us that there is such a thing as little faith and great faith. In fact, we are told of only two things that Jesus was ever impressed with in the scriptures. He was impressed with or marveled at the belief and the faith of the centurion (Matthew 8).

How can we move from the realm of little faith or faithlessness into the realm of great faith? I believe God has given a number of tools to develop faith in us. Let me give just three of these today. They are very simple but take note of them.

1. First, exposure to God's word develops faith.

God gives us His word. Our exposure to God's word develops our faith. We read, in fact,

... faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

I John 5:13 tells us that there is a relationship between faith or assurance and what has been written.

There is a link between knowing the word and having faith. This is a tool.

2. Secondly, not only our exposure to the word, but our observation of the world develops faith.

In Hebrews 11, the first "By faith . . ." statement concerns the world around us. We not only learn about God from what we read in His word, we learn about God by what we observe in the world. In other words, there is a relationship between what we observe happening in the world and what we read written in God's word. A person of faith is able to interpret what is happening in the world by what is written in the word.

Now, let us take a look at Hebrews 11:3, which is the verse I referred to with the first "By faith . . ." statement.

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is

seen was not made out of things which are visible.

Now if I were a reader, I would be scratching my head thinking, "Now, wait a second, Lord. It's no stretch of my faith to believe that You have created the world. In fact, anyone in the first century, especially the Hebrew Christian that this was written to, would have acknowledged that God created the world. Why is there such a fuss about this? Do You, in this very first 'By faith . . .' statement, mean, 'By faith, I believe that God is the creator of the universe'?"

"Yes."

Let me tell the reason I think this statement is there. I think it is there, not necessarily for the first century reader. I think it is there for the future generations who find it more and more difficult to believe that God created the universe. It is as if God looked down the corridor of time and knew there would be generations coming in which to believe that He created the world would be a statement of conviction; a statement of great faith. I believe that we are living in that generation today.

One educator, by the name of John Patterson, who is now retired from Iowa State University, has advocated that, "every professor should reserve the right to fail any student in his class no matter what the grade record indicates, whenever basic misunderstandings of a certain magnitude [creationism] are discovered. Moreover, I would propose retracting grades and possibly even degrees if such gross misunderstandings are publicly espoused after passing the course, or after being graduated . . ."

This self-avowed atheist and evolutionist went on record as saying, "No advocate of such propaganda [creationism] should be trusted to teach science classes or administer science programs anywhere or under any circumstances. Moreover, if any are now doing so, they should be dismissed."¹

I know this is a radical view, but it is the direction of our culture. It is not a new view, by the way. Theories have abounded. In fact, in 1808, there were catalogued nearly eighty theories of evolution – eighty theories in opposition to creationism. They have come and gone.

It is interesting that in the last two hundred years, even scientists are calling into question the Theory of Evolution.

One Swedish nonbeliever and evolutionist by the name of Dr. Heribert-Nilsson, writes, “My attempts to demonstrate evolution by an experiment carried on for more than forty years have completely failed . . . The deficiencies are real; they will never be filled.”ⁱⁱ

Do not doubt this for a moment.

One agnostic, who finally came to Christ, said the stumbling block to him was Hebrews 11:3.

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.

As an unbeliever who came to Christ, this man said, paraphrased, “As I contemplated the first cause, the creative design, the first power, interpreting it in the light of the Super Dense Theory or the Big Bang Theory, which is predominant today, I stumbled. If I were to fill a big washtub with nine hundred Scrabble cubes, each with a letter on it, and slosh them around and then, throw them on my living room floor, someone could observe that and say, ‘Yes, there is some outside force, some first creative act, something.’ However, if those letters fell in such a way that they were a short story or if in those nine hundred cubes a beautiful poem could be read, that would imply a creative designer.”

Darwin himself, in his later years, even admitted that the human eye was so complex, “I would even doubt my Theories of Evolution.”

It is a tragedy that without evidence, the myths are still being propounded. We are living in a generation that it is a statement of faith to say, “God created the heavens and the earth.”

Can the world trust the Bible that was written by an invisible spirit – the Holy Spirit? No, but do not expect them to. The critics have abounded and their theories have fallen – most of them by the simple turn of the archaeologist’s spade.

For instance, critics said that Daniel was obviously a myth because he mentioned a man by the name of Belshazzar, the king of Babylon. They said there was not one shred of historical evidence that Belshazzar ever lived; it was a hoax. Then, the spade turned and we now know, apart from God’s word, that Belshazzar lived. Not only do we know this, but we also know the names of Belshazzar’s sisters and even the name of his personal secretary. We can chuckle because we believed it before it was ever uncovered.

For centuries, to give another example, men believed the world rested on a foundation. At the same time, Job’s voice, in God’s word, cried, but was ignored,

He [God] . . . hangs the earth on nothing. (Job 26:7)

Do you know what the problem is? The problem is that the world distrusts the invisible, the intangible, and the unknowable. However, when you and I became Christians, what did we discover? We discovered that we have the same problem – we still have a tough time with the invisible; we still have difficulty with the unknowable. As a result, we become skeptical and analytical and we want to see it all written out in black and white. We dare not take a step that would imply faith without knowing that when we step, there will be something underneath that step. Becoming a Christian does not erase the problem.

The wonderful news is that Jesus Christ knew we would have this problem, as they had it when this Hebrew’s verse was written, and instead of dismissing us, in His grace, He decided to develop us. How? By our exposure to the word and by our observation of the world.

3. Thirdly, our experiences in our walk develop faith.

This is one way Jesus Christ brings us along.

Daniel is a classic example. As a fifteen year old, he stood in the court of a pagan king and said, “No, I will not eat your food because to do so would violate Levitical law. Give me mashed pulp and water.”

He should have lost a lot of weight, but instead, he gained it. At the end of the testing period, his cheeks were rosy and he was stronger than the other Hebrew children who had abandoned their faith and eaten the king’s food.

At the age of fifteen, Daniel was willing to risk his health for God.

In his mid-life, we see Daniel pointing his finger at King Belshazzar and saying, “You are found wanting. God will take the kingdom from your hands.”

This man was risking his occupation; his livelihood.

As a ninety-five year old, Daniel is continuing to worship God and as a result, is thrown into the den of lions. He was risking his life.

What do we say? “Lord, that’s for me! Give me the lions. I can take it.”

My friends, we have too much difficulty with trusting God for our health. We have too much difficulty trusting God for our livelihood; our jobs. Is it any wonder that more of us do not face the lions?

Yet, I want to point out that as a teenager, God gave Daniel what he could handle, by His grace. So he said, “Give me vegetables and water.” In his mid-life, God had brought Daniel along to the point that he could trust Him for his livelihood. By his latter years, Daniel could ultimately, trust God with his life.

This is God’s developing in our walk. Where are you in your walk? Where are you with your health, with your job, with your basic needs, with your life? Know that God has placed you there to develop your faith – to take you from little faith to great faith.

Application

We do not know a lot about the events that occurred in the lives of these two disciples, Philip and Thomas. However, let me give two thoughts to apply what we do know to our own lives.

1. First, Jesus Christ is committed to using doubting disciples to accomplish His work.

I love this. Both Philip and Thomas were doubters; they were skeptical and analytical, wanting everything to be in front of their view. They needed proof, but what did God do? He used them. Imagine that! God uses us too.

We know that Philip died a faithful man. He died a martyr’s death, as a matter of fact, after decades of serving his Lord, who was now invisible, and working toward His kingdom that was now invisible. Philip, in fact, was martyred in a cruel way. He was hung upside-down on an X-shaped cross with his ankles and thighs cut, so he would slowly bleed to death. His only request, as he died, was that he not be wrapped in linen like his Lord had been, because he was not worthy.

God is committed to using those who are of weak faith.

2. Secondly, Jesus Christ is committed to developing skeptical disciples into confident disciples.

There is an apocryphal book that is filled with legends that has been excluded from our canon of scripture for that very reason. There are perhaps, germs of truth in its pages, however, based on

historical accounts that date back to the early centuries. This apocryphal book is called *The Acts of Thomas*. It gives us some insight into Thomas’ life after the ascension of Christ.

It is said that Thomas went to India and pioneered a work for Christ. King Gundaphorus, at one point, took Thomas, because he was an honest and credible man, and asked him if he could entrust his wealth to him to build a fine palace for him. Thomas said, “Yes, I will.”

So Thomas took a lot of money and went to South India, where there is, by the way, the church known as the Thomas Church that traces its roots back to Thomas himself. He began to work there among the people, but was so overwhelmed with their needs, so overwhelmed with their poverty, so overwhelmed with their spiritual darkness that he invested all of the king’s money in reaching these people.

Eventually, the king got a little suspicious and called for Thomas. He asked, “Thomas, have you built my palace?”

Thomas said, “Yes, I have.”

So the king said, “Then, let’s go see it.”

Thomas replied, “You can’t now, but you can when you die.”

The story continues that the king was so incensed that he thought of taking Thomas’ life. Instead, however, Thomas lived and won the king to Christ.

We could ask, “Thomas, are you building an invisible palace? Are you investing in an invisible kingdom? Have you seen it, Thomas?”

“No.”

“Have you ever been there?”

“No.”

“What proof do you have that this kingdom even exists?”

Perhaps by this time, Thomas would look us in the eye and say, “I have no proof that the kingdom exists, other than I know the King.”

Do we need any other proof?

ⁱ <http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/2504>.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.allaboutthejourney.org/problems-with-the-fossil-record.htm>.