

The God who wants to persuade us

Let me draw you together and we're going to focus on our big topic of the week, which is 'The God who wants to persuade us.' Now, for those of you with keen eyesight, you've noticed that I am standing on a chair. Let me say, first of all, this is not because of my height insecurities. I'm very secure. I am average male height, I think, well, that's what I tell myself. Why am I standing on a chair? Because tonight I want to try and illustrate to you what it means to believe in Jesus.

Now, we've been thinking about that over the last few weeks. We've heard the phrase again and again: to believe in Jesus, to have faith in Jesus. I want to try and illustrate what that means.

Now, here goes. If I wanted to fall backwards off this chair, what could I do? If I just fall backwards now, then I'm going to hurt myself. That's probably true, yeah? And you don't want me to do that, do you? No, not at all. So I need a volunteer. And this is not a random volunteer cause I need someone that I trust, someone that I've known for a long time, someone who's trustworthy, someone I know who likes me, and someone who's not going to drop me. Okay, so who can that be? I've picked Gary. So come out Gary. So come out Gary.

Now, I have known Gary for a few years. Gary's very trustworthy. So here's my opportunity to show you that I have faith in Gary. Now, this is not blind faith. I trust Gary. I'm persuaded that he is trustworthy. I'm persuaded that he likes me and that he will catch me. Now, believing in Gary... Well, I could just say I believe in Gary, but how do I really know I believe in Gary? Well, I have to show it, don't I? I have to really prove it to you. It has to be very active. So would you like me to show you that I believe in Gary? Okay? So if I do this, and then if I believe in Gary...So! Thank you very much, Gary. You may sit down.

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? Well, trusting in Jesus, having faith in Jesus – they mean the same thing – is a very active thing. It's not just believing things about Jesus. There is a personal, active surrendering to Jesus. But it's not blind faith. We are persuaded by the evidence that we can trust in Jesus. We're persuaded by the evidence that we see that we can and we should surrender personally to Jesus.

Now, the question that you should have is: What kind of evidence can we look at that should persuade us that it's rational and reasonable to believe in Jesus? That's what I want to show you tonight, and it's in John's Gospel, so if you could grab your copy of John's Gospel. And turn with me to John chapter 20, and find verse 24. And I want to read to you verses 24 and 25. All this takes place after the physical resurrection of Jesus, and this is what we're told: "Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' "But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.'"

Now, the first thing I would love to point out to you, and it's what I love about the two verses that I have just read, is how honest they are. Because here is Thomas, and we are told that Thomas was one of the Twelve. That is, Thomas was one of the close personal disciples of Jesus. Jesus had taken these twelve men aside. He had trained them. He had taught them. He had prepared them to be his special spokesmen. And Thomas was going to be one of the early leaders in the young church.

And yet what are we told here? Well, his friends excitedly come up to him and they say to him, 'Thomas! We have seen the Lord!' And what does he say? 'Well, unless I see for myself, I will not believe.' Can you imagine how embarrassing that would have been for Thomas in the early church? Can you imagine all those conversations with people who were becoming Christians? 'Say that again, Thomas. They came up to you, and they were excited, and they said, "We have seen the Lord Jesus Christ!" What did you say again?' No, no, 'I will not believe unless I see it.' So the temptation would have been to airbrush out this part of the story.

Have you ever seen that, in those computer programs that you can get? Photo editing software – I love it! You know the airbrush tool? I know you're looking at me and you're thinking, 'Nah! You're okay. You don't need a bit of airbrushing at all. I'm sure you look glorious in pictures.' But no, not at all. I discover all those bits of grey in my hair, but I love the airbrush tool. 'Cause I can go in there, and then suddenly the hair is all black, it's wonderful, and I look ten years younger. I love it! Don't you? The airbrush tool?

Well, what would have been the temptation for the people who were writing these early accounts of the life of Jesus? To airbrush all the parts that would have been embarrassing to them. But they didn't. Because they were so concerned to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, that they told us everything. Even the embarrassing bits that perhaps they would have preferred not to be there.

Now, we've no idea where Thomas was. I'm sure he must have been kicking himself when he got back into that room and his friends had said, "We have seen the Lord!" But we can certainly imagine the different atmosphere that would've been there before to the atmosphere that would've been there afterwards. So for whatever reason he left the room, and what would it be like before? Well, they were locked up, they were fearful, they were discouraged, they were frightened. They had that feeling of, 'Well, all those years we've invested our time and our energy in following this person that we thought was the Messiah, but he's dead.'

Ever had that feeling? You know, all those hours you've poured into something, and you think it's a waste of time. And yet, he comes back and the atmosphere has changed. There is joy, there's no more tears, there's excitement in the room, and they bound up to him and they say, 'Thomas! We've seen the Lord Jesus!' And the reason? Not because they've been saying to themselves, 'Well, we've got to believe,' or 'We've mustered up some sort of faith from our bellies and now we can believe,' or 'We've just got to!' No, the reason: 'We have seen the Lord!'

Now, how do you think Thomas should have responded to that news? Do you think he was justified in what he did? Do you think he should have believed his friends when they said, 'We have seen the Lord!' or do you think he was being reasonable? Well, lots of people, I think, have a lot of sympathy for Thomas. They think, 'Well, he seems quite rational. If I was in Thomas's shoes, I think I'd have been asking to see the Lord Jesus myself.'

And we say that because the claim is such a big claim. You know, if Thomas had come back into the room and, for example, Simon Peter had said to him, 'Thomas, you'll never believe this! You know when you were out? Do you know what happened? I was playing Andrew at cards, and I beat him.' Well, I think Thomas wouldn't have said, 'Really? Are you sure you've got some evidence of that? I'm not quite sure I can believe it.' He would've just said, 'Yeah, okay.' Because it's not a huge claim.

When my mum calls me, and those are always nice phone calls – your mum calls, and she tells you how things are going on – and she says to me, 'Lee, let me tell you what your dad and I did today,' and I say, 'What was that?' and she says to me, 'We went for an ice cream,' well, I don't say to my mum, 'Well, I hope you've got some video evidence of that because unless I see you having the ice cream, I will not believe it.' No, I don't do that, because it's all very ordinary, isn't it?

And yet the claims of Thomas' friends were that they had seen this dead Messiah risen physically from the dead, and so therefore we have some sympathy, don't we, for Thomas when he says, 'I need to see in order to believe,'?

So what are we to make of Thomas? Well, the first thing we should understand is that wanting evidence is not a bad thing. The Bible is not advocating blind faith. It is a reasonable response to evidence that we trust the Lord Jesus Christ.

But, before we all rush off and buy our 'I love Thomas' T-shirts or 'Thomas is my hero' T-shirts, let me show you why Thomas should never be our role model. Have a look at what we're told in verse 26: "A week later Jesus' disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'" So Jesus {is} not quite happy with him, is he? "Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"

Now, the first thing to notice is that Jesus doesn't say, 'Shh! Thomas, no! Be quiet! What a ridiculous thing for you to say. "My Lord and my God"? Keep your voice down, Thomas. That's a ridiculous idea. How dare you say to me that I am your master, that I am the Lord of the universe! That I am fully and utterly divine. No, shh, keep your voice down Thomas, that's ridiculous!' He doesn't say that, does he? He accepts what Thomas says as true. Thomas has got it absolutely right. Jesus is his master, his Lord, and is fully and utterly divine.

However, although Jesus accepted what Thomas said about his identity, he never commended Thomas for his attitude. So you never hear the Lord Jesus Christ saying, 'Oh, well done, Thomas. Well done. We need more people like you around here. More people with your attitude. We want lots and lots of people who say, "I need to see in order to believe.'" What does he actually say to him? Verse 29: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; but blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Now, what did Jesus mean, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed?" Well, before you say, 'Ah! Told you! I knew it! I knew it. Here it is from the words of Jesus himself. He is saying, "You've just got to have faith." Surely this is Jesus saying, "Well, you can't see, so you might as well put the blindfold on and have a leap in the dark.'"

Well, before you conclude that, have a look at what we're told in verse 30: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Now, do you see how those verses help us understand what Jesus has just said? So when Jesus says, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed," he's not talking about people who, in the future, will believe without any evidence at all. He's talking about people who, in the future, will believe not because they have seen Jesus but because they have believed the reliable written down eyewitness testimony of other people who have seen. Or in other words, he is talking about people who, in the future, will do what Thomas should have done in the past. And what was that? To believe the eyewitness testimony of his friends.

Now, some people at this point will say, 'No. That's just not going to happen. I need more than that. I need more than words simply in a book to make such a life-changing decision. I need to see in order to believe. It's not good enough. I need more evidence than that. I need to see, and possibly even touch Jesus for myself.' Well, can I give you the short answer? No, you don't. Now, shall I give you the reasons? Two reasons why we don't need to see Jesus for our self to put our faith in him.

The first one is an everyday example. We see this in our country, we see it in countries around the world every single day in Courts of Law. If you imagine what a jury has to do every single day, suppose they are gathering round because a crime has taken place, and they have to give their verdict on someone who is presented as committing a crime. Well, what do they do? The jury hasn't seen the crime, have they? But they gather together and over days perhaps, over weeks perhaps, evidence is presented to them. Now, all sorts of evidence is put in their direction. But one of the big things that they can see and hear is what? Eyewitness testimony.

If someone else has claimed to see it, in fact, if you have multiple eyewitness testimony, well, that is great. Because then what does the jury do? Well, once it establishes that the eyewitnesses are trustworthy and credible, then it believes what they say. This happens. Every day, around the world. And if we were on a jury, we could not say, 'I'm sorry, I cannot come to my decision because I need to see in order to believe.' That's not how things work. Big, life-changing decisions get made every day by people who have not seen, but have relied on the trustworthy testimony of people who have seen, and therefore they have made their decision.

Now, the second reason that we don't need to see Jesus in order to believe in him is because of what Jesus says. You know, Jesus' big plan for spreading his message around the world... well, it's not to have Thomas encounters all around the globe, is it? He could have done that. He could have said, 'The way I'm going to change the world is I'm going to appear individually to person after person, and they're going to see me.' But he said, 'No. My plan to communicate the greatest news in the world is for people to engage with the eyewitness testimony written down in books like this.'

Now, in just a few minutes I'm going try and explain why I think we can trust what is written in books like this. But I know I've said quite a few controversial things tonight, so why don't you take a few minutes on your tables to discuss what I've said, and then after a few minutes we'll see how we continue.

Identity – Who is God? Who are we?

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