

206. The Gospel of John 20:21-31

Sent By The Son-Part 3
A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier
(1-22-23)

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In our study in John's Gospel, we have come to Chapter 20 which chronicles for us the people Jesus appeared to on the Sunday of His resurrection.

We've already looked at the people Jesus appeared to that Sunday morning and afternoon—and now we've focused our attention on those He appeared to that evening—as well as one disciple (Thomas) who wasn't there the evening of Jesus' resurrection but was with the others 8 days later when Jesus appeared to His disciples again as recorded in John's Gospel Chapter 20—

John 20:19–23 (NKJV)

¹⁹ Then, the same day at evening, being the first *day* of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace *be* with you." ²⁰ When He had said this, He showed them *His* hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." ²² And when He had said this, He breathed on *them*, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they are retained."

We've already studied verses 19 through 22—focusing on the statement by Jesus in verse 21 which becomes the theme verse of the passage—"**As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.**"

We call this the "Great Commission"—"*Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every person...*"

This Great Commission was given by Jesus to all His disciples that would ever believe in Him down through the centuries—not just those in the upper room the night of His resurrection.

Now, as I have said, verse 23 has been used by the Roman Catholic Church to teach that—right here Jesus gave Catholic priests the authority to hear confessions and forgive sins—but is that true?

When it comes to hearing confessions and forgiving sins—

- *Jesus never practiced hearing confessions in the gospels (as the RCC does).*
- *The apostles never heard confessions in the Book of Acts.*
- *The practice of hearing confessions for the forgiveness of sins was never taught or even mentioned in the epistles.*

So what is Jesus saying in John 20:23?—

John 20:23 (NKJV)

²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they are retained.”

Again, don't read too much into this—Jesus isn't giving these disciples the power to forgive sin, for no one can forgive sin but God (Mark 2:7 and Daniel 9:9).

When it comes to properly interpreting a passage in the Bible—context is key!

Remember, the context of this entire passage is 'the Great Commission.'

I believe what Jesus is telling His disciples (all of His disciples not just those in that upper room the night of His resurrection)—that they were to go into the world preaching the Gospel and fulfilling the Great Commission as He had done. (verse 21)

If sinners received the good news of God, repented of their sins, and believed on Jesus Christ as their Savior—He was authorizing His disciples to tell them that their sins have been *forgiven*.

Others that rejected the Gospel—the Lord was authorizing His disciples to tell them that their sins were *retained* (remain unforgiven by God)—and that if they were to die in that condition they would be lost (in hell) forever.

Commentator and author Warren Wiersbe had this to say on verse 23 of John 20—

“A correct understanding of the Greek text helps us here. Some years ago, I corresponded with the eminent Greek scholar Dr. Julius R. Mantey (now deceased) about this verse, and he assured me that the correct translation both here and in Matthew 16:19 should be:

‘Whosoever sins you remit [forgive] shall have already been forgiven them, and whosoever sins you retain [do not forgive] shall have already not been forgiven them.’

In other words, the disciples did not provide forgiveness; they proclaimed forgiveness on the basis of [each person receiving or rejecting] the message of the Gospel.”

Now at this point we move from the nature of forgiveness to the nature of unbelief.

John 20:24–29 (NKJV)

²⁴ Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples therefore said to him, “We have seen the Lord.” So he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” ²⁶ And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, “Peace to you!” ²⁷ Then He said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand *here*, and put *it* into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” ²⁸ And Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed *are* those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

- *Why was Thomas not with the other disciples when they met on the evening of Jesus' resurrection?*
- *Was he so disappointed, discouraged and defeated by the death of Jesus that he had lost all hope for the future and didn't even want to be around his friends—so he isolated himself from everyone?*

As someone has said, “Solitude only feeds discouragement and helps it grow into self-pity, which is even worse.” (Hebrews 10:25)

We get the impression from Thomas that he seems to have been a pessimist—in other words, he tended to be negative and didn't receive the testimony of others so quickly—he needed to see it for himself.

We call him *"Doubting Thomas,"* but Jesus did not rebuke him for his doubts, He rebuked him for unbelief—**"Do not be unbelieving but believing."**

Wiersbe—

"Doubt is often an intellectual problem: we want to believe, but our faith is overwhelmed by problems and questions. Unbelief is a moral problem; we simply will not believe."

In the Greek verse 25 **'I will not believe'** is in the double negative—*'I absolutely will not, no way will I believe.'*

➤ *What was it that Thomas would not believe?*

He refused to believe the testimony of the other disciples that Jesus Christ was alive.

The verb **"said"** in verse 25—**"The other disciples therefore said to him, 'We have seen the Lord'"**—in the Greek means that the disciples—**"kept saying to him"** that they had seen the Lord Jesus Christ alive.

I would be on Thomas' side on this if all he had was their personal anecdotal testimony—like, **"I know Jesus is God because He changed my life!"** Then I would want some empirical evidence to go along with their anecdotal evidence—but that wasn't the case with Thomas.

You see, Jesus on 3 or 4 occasions had told His disciples during the last 6 months of His earthly ministry—that when they came to Jerusalem, He was going to be crucified but on the third day He would rise from the dead. All of Jesus' disciples including Thomas had a promise from God Himself that Jesus' death wouldn't be final—but would only last 3 days before He would come back from the dead.

Look, it's not wrong to want evidence or *proof* that something is real before you believe in it—even as Acts 1:3 tells us that our faith is built on *"many infallible proofs."*

Also, another problem with Thomas was that—he laid down conditions for the Lord to meet before he was willing to believe. It would be like someone saying, *"I'll believe in Jesus when He gets me my dream job, or when He lets me win the lottery."*

There is nothing wrong with wanting some evidence
before you believe that Jesus is God, Who rose from the dead.

❖ But the kind of faith that has conditions attached to it before a person will believe in Jesus is sinful because it seeks to turn God into a *'trained servant'* who must *'jump through my hoops'* before I will 'bless' Him with my faith. **That is misguided at best and wicked at worst!**

Thomas is called **'the twin'** in the gospels—which means he had a twin brother or sister—and yet we are never introduced to Thomas' twin in the New Testament. I think the Holy Spirit did that on purpose—I think if you want to know who Thomas' twin is—all you have to do is look in the mirror!

You see, all of us who are the brothers and sisters of 'doubting' Thomas (saved)—act like his twin at times! Many of us have walked with Jesus for years as His disciples—and yet we still demand that God 'prove' Himself to us by *first* healing, or providing, or working in a given situation before we will believe His Word is true—like Thomas we cling to the motto, *"Seeing is believing"* which is blatant unbelief on display.

You remember the story in Matthew Chapter 14—(the background was that Jesus had just fed the 5000 with a small amount of food):

Matthew 14:22–33 (NKJV)

²² Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. ²³ And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. ²⁴ But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. ²⁵ Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Be of good cheer! It is I [*the Greek is literally—“Be of good cheer. I AM*]; do not be afraid.” ²⁸ And Peter answered Him and said, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” ²⁹ So He said, “Come.” And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw that the wind *was* boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ And immediately Jesus stretched out *His* hand and caught him, and said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, “Truly You are the Son of God.”

Something else that Warren Wiersbe brings up that I think is worth of mentioning—

“Thomas is a good warning to all of us not to miss meeting with God’s people on the Lord’s Day (Heb. 10:22–25). Because Thomas was not there, he missed seeing Jesus Christ, hearing His words of peace, and receiving His commission and gift of spiritual life. He had to endure a week of fear and unbelief when he could have been experiencing joy and peace! Remember Thomas when you are tempted to stay home from church. You never know what special blessing you might miss!”

This whole story in John 20 with Thomas, reminds me of something that took place early in Jesus’ ministry—

John 4:46–49 (NKJV)

⁴⁶ So Jesus came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum. ⁴⁷ When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you *people* see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.” ⁴⁹ The nobleman said to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies!”

Some people just have to see God do a *miracle* of some kind (or at least do something ‘*dramatic*’) before they’ll believe.

The world (and even many Christians) have a motto they love to quote—

“Seeing is believing”

—but God says just the opposite—

“believing is seeing.”

But, Jesus took it a step further when He said to Thomas in John 20:29—*“Blessed are those who believe without seeing”*—

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

There are a lot of people in Christian circles like this today who have gotten *hooked* on seeing signs and wonders—and as such they now crave them like addicts craving their next fix.

When Jesus says—"**Unless you people see signs and wonders** [‘miracles’], **you will by no means believe**"—the word He uses for ‘wonders’ is the Greek word *terata*.

That is a word that stresses the *awe*, the *excitement*, the *exhilaration*—the rush of adrenalin that seeing a miracle performed produces in those who witness it. In other words, Jesus uses a word that implied these people were nothing more than ‘*thrill-seekers*’, ‘*miracle junkies*’—those who only wanted to see miracles for the rush they got from it!

Apparently, Jesus knowing this man’s heart knew that he was thinking, “*If He does this miracle and heals my son—then I’ll believe in Him!*”

As I said earlier, many people today feel the same way—“*If God comes through for me, and heals me or my loved one of the cancer—then I’ll believe in Him and if not He’s just a fraud!*”

There are many *Christians* who have ‘*baby (immature) faith*’ which can only be *fed* by signs and wonders—their faith is shallow, weak, emotional and experiential. But just as no child can live on a constant diet of dessert—neither can a child of God live on a constant diet of signs and wonders (whether real or perceived).

Christians need the Word of God to grow strong and healthy in their faith—“*as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.*” (1 Peter 2:2)

I believe that, in a roundabout way, Jesus is addressing this very issue here. Jesus is trying to take this nobleman’s weak faith, which was predicated on the miraculous, and elevate it to a strong faith that was predicated on the Word of God.

Much like the Samaritans who believed His Word and got saved without seeing the Lord perform any miracles for them—

John 4:40–41 (NKJV)

⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of His own word.

This nobleman probably felt rebuked by Jesus’ comment (4:48)—however, Jesus’ aim was not to *offend* him but rather to *bring* him to saving faith in Himself—even if the truth of God is sometimes offensive. (Galatians 5:11)

The Lord Jesus is always trying to lift our faith to new spiritual heights—which He was attempting right here with this desperate father (and with Thomas in John 20)—

John 4:50 (NKJV)

⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your son lives." So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way.

At this point, Jesus elevated this man’s faith from having to see a miracle—to simply believing the Word of the Lord.

A.W. Pink—

"This is very blessed. It shows us the power of the spoken word not only on the boy that was healed, but on his father, too—'Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God' (Romans 10:17)."

John 4:51-53 (NKJV)

⁵¹ And as he was now going down, his servants met him and told *him*, saying, "Your son lives!" ⁵² Then he inquired of them the hour when he got better. And they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour [*one o'clock in the afternoon*] the fever left him." ⁵³ So the father knew that *it was* at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, "Your son lives." And he himself believed, and his whole household.

So, the story ends with, not only this man's son being physically healed—but also with the father and his entire family being spiritually healed (from sin) and eternally saved.

That is always the purpose of miracles, never to entertain—but to point people to Jesus that they might receive Him as Savior and Lord and be saved.

John 20:30–31 (NKJV)

³⁰ **And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.**

Not all the miracles performed by Jesus are recorded in John's Gospel—the Holy Spirit selected those signs which would best serve His purpose. Here we have John's objective in writing the book—it was so that his readers may believe that Jesus is the true Messiah and the Son of God—and that by believing, they would have eternal life in His name.

Therefore, if someone is a seeker who wants to know if Jesus is really God and the Savior—direct them to read the Gospel of John. Because God said, *"My word will not return to Me void. It will accomplish the purposes for which I have sent it."* (Isaiah 55:11)

Let me close with one more quote from Warren Wiersbe—which sums up the whole Gospel of John:

"We must not look at Thomas and the other disciples and envy them, as though the power of Christ's resurrection could never be experienced in our lives today. That was why John wrote this Gospel—so that people in every age could know that Jesus is God and that faith in Him brings everlasting life.

It is not necessary to "see" Jesus Christ in order to believe. Yes, it was a blessing for the early Christians to see their Lord and know that He was alive; but that is not what saved them. They were saved, not by seeing, but by believing. The emphasis throughout the Gospel of John is on *believing*. There are nearly 100 references in this Gospel to believing on Jesus Christ.

You and I today cannot see Christ, nor can we see Him perform the miracles (signs) that John wrote about in this book. But the record is there, and that is all that we need. *"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"* (Romans 10:17).

As you read John's record, you come face to face with Jesus Christ, how He lived, what He said, and what He did. All of the evidence points to the conclusion that He is indeed God come in the flesh, the Savior of the world.

The signs that John selected and described in this book are proof of the deity of Christ. They are important—but sinners are not saved by believing in miracles; they are saved by believing on Jesus Christ. Many of the Jews in Jerusalem believed on Jesus because of His miracles, but He did not believe in them! (John 2:23–25) Great

crowds followed Him because of His miracles (John 6:2); but in the end, most of them left Him for good (John 6:66). Even the religious leaders who plotted His death believed that He did miracles—but this “faith” did not save them (John 11:47).

Faith in His miracles should lead to faith in His Word, and to personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Jesus Himself pointed out that faith in His works (miracles) was but *the first step* toward faith in the Word of God (John 5:36–40). The sinner must “hear” the Word if he (or she) is to be saved (John 5:24). There was no need for John to describe every miracle that our Lord performed—in fact, he supposed that a complete record could never be written (John 21:25). The life and ministry of Jesus Christ were simply too rich and full for any writer, even an inspired one, to give a complete record. But a complete record is not necessary. All of the basic facts are here for us to read and consider. There is sufficient truth for any sinner to believe and be saved!

The *subject* of John’s Gospel is “*Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*” He presented a threefold proof of this thesis: our Lord’s works, our Lord’s walk, and our Lord’s words. In this Gospel, you see Jesus performing miracles; you watch Him living a perfect life in the midst of His enemies; and you hear Him speaking words that nobody else could speak.

Either Jesus was a madman, or He was deluded, or He was all that He claimed to be. While some of His enemies did call Him deranged and deluded, the majority of people who watched Him and listened to Him concluded that He was unique, unlike anyone else they had ever known. How could a madman or a deluded man accomplish what Jesus accomplished? *When people trusted Him, their lives were transformed!* That does not happen when you trust a madman or a deceiver. He claimed to be God come in the flesh, the Son of God, the Savior of the world—that is what He is!

John was not content simply to explain a subject—he was an evangelist who wanted to achieve an object! He wanted his readers to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved! He was not writing a biography to entertain or a history to enlighten—he was writing an evangel to change people’s lives.

The ten disciples were changed from fear to courage, and Thomas was changed from unbelief to confidence. Now, John invites *you* to trust Jesus Christ and be changed from death to eternal life.

If you have already made this life-changing decision—give thanks to God for the precious gift of eternal life! If you have never made this decision, *do so right now—*

“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36).”

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

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