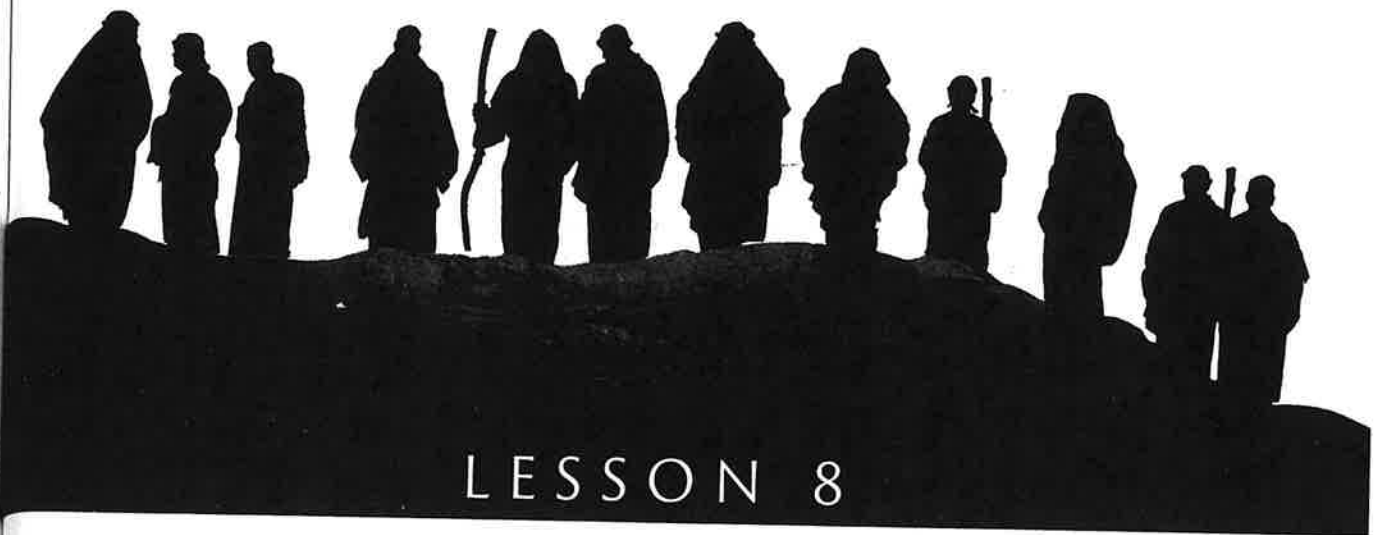




LESSON 8

MATTHEW AND THOMAS

THE TAX COLLECTOR AND THE TWIN

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MATTHEW 9:9

Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him."

JOHN 11:16

The prophet Isaiah said of the Lord, "He brings down those who dwell on high, the lofty city; He lays it low, He lays it low to the ground, He brings it down to the dust. The foot shall tread it down—the feet of the poor and the steps of the needy" (Isaiah 26:5–6). Given this, it is little wonder that we find Jesus shunning the "lofty" religious elites in choosing His disciples and instead seeking out the ordinary. This



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is, after all, how it has always been in God's economy. He exalts the humble and lays low the proud (see Ezekiel 21:26; Matthew 23:12; James 4:6).

Jesus' complaint against the religious leaders of Israel—like the scribes and the Pharisees—was that they were acting as “blind guides” (Matthew 23:16). In truth, most members of the Jewish establishment were so spiritually blind that even when Jesus did miracles before their eyes, they could not see Him as the Messiah. They saw Him instead as a threat and an enemy and “plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him” (12:14).

It wasn't that the religious leaders doubted Jesus performed miracles. After all, who *could* deny the results? There were too many miracles, and they had been done too publicly to be discounted. While some tried to claim that Jesus performed His miracles by the power of Satan (see 12:24), no one actually denied the miracles were real. What actually made the religious elite infuriated at Jesus was not the miracles but the fact that He called them sinners. When Jesus, like John the Baptist before Him, preached a message of repentance and said *they* were sinners in need of God's forgiveness, that crossed a line in their minds.

It was thus because of Jesus' message that they vilified Him, rejected Him, and ultimately executed Him. This is precisely why, when it came time for Jesus to select His disciples, He chose lowly and common men. He needed followers who were willing to acknowledge their own sinfulness and who were unafraid to have their spiritual eyes opened. Ordinary men like Matthew and Thomas.

STARTING OUT

What are some examples of spiritual blindness in our world today? What are some of the ways you have seen God open people's eyes to the truth of the gospel?

EXPLORING THE STORY

In all likelihood, none of the twelve disciples was more notorious of a sinner than Matthew. So it is surprising to read how Jesus gave him *a new calling* and how this led to Matthew gaining *a new perspective* on his sinful state. We also read how another disciple named Thomas demonstrated *a courageous heart* in agreeing to accompany Jesus to Bethany and how, after the resurrection, his spiritual eyes were opened and he received *renewed hope*. You will explore stories from the Gospels related to these two disciples in the following section.

Matthew's New Calling

Matthew is a Greek name that likely derives from the Hebrew name Mattaniah (see 1 Chronicles 9:15), which means “gift of God.” Matthew’s Jewish name was Levi, and Mark and Luke use this name in their story about his calling (see Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:27–32). However, Luke refers to him as Matthew in his lists of the twelve disciples (see Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). Mark adds the detail that he was “Levi the son of Alphaeus” (Mark 2:14), which is the same name as another disciple’s father (see Matthew 10:3), though it is unlikely they were brothers.

What sets Matthew apart from the rest of the disciples is his occupation. Matthew was a tax collector (or publican), which meant that he was among the most despised people in society—sometimes grouped with prostitutes in terms of social standing (see Matthew 21:32). The job of tax collectors was to collect

TAX COLLECTORS

Tax collectors were despised in Israel. They were hated and vilified by all of Jewish society. They were deemed lower than Herodians (Jews loyal to the Idumean dynasty of Herods) and more worthy of scorn than the occupying Roman soldiers. Publicans were men who had bought tax franchises from the Roman emperor and then extorted money from the people of Israel to feed the Roman coffers and to pad their own pockets. They often strong-armed money out of people with the use of thugs. Most were despicable, vile, unprincipled scoundrels.¹

a certain amount of funds for the Roman government, but they often extorted extra amounts to fill their own personal coffers.

Matthew was even more reviled because he was a Jew. If tax collectors entered a home, all that was in it was considered unclean, and they were forbidden from entering the synagogues. Jewish tax collectors were thus essentially cut off from their community and places of worship. Given this, Matthew must have been shocked when Jesus chose him. Luke reports his reaction was immediate: "He left all, rose up, and followed Him" (5:28).

The scene as Matthew describes it in his own Gospel is surprisingly undramatic. Jesus saw him sitting at the tax office, said, "Follow Me," and Matthew instantly and without hesitation "arose and followed Him" (9:9). There was no shortage of money-grubbers waiting in the wings to get their chance at his business. Once Matthew walked away, he knew that he could never go back. Yet he never regretted his decision to answer Jesus' call.

- Read Matthew 9:9-13 and Mark 1:16-20. What are similarities between Jesus' calling of Matthew and His calling of the fishermen? What similarities are there between Matthew's response to Jesus' call and the fishermen's?

- Read Luke 18:18-23. What invitation did Jesus extend to the man? What difference do you see in the way he responded as compared to Matthew, Andrew, Peter, James, and John?

- Read Luke 5:27–32. Based on Matthew’s actions, what do you gather about his state of mind (and heart) at the time that Jesus came along? What did Jesus mean when He said that He had come to minister to people just like Matthew and his friends?

- What encouragement do you gain from Matthew’s story about the kinds of people whom God calls to serve in His kingdom?

Matthew’s New Perspective

Matthew moves from his brief narrative about his calling to a dinner party attended by Jesus, His disciples, and “many tax collectors and sinners” (9:10). Luke reveals that this was actually a “great feast in [Matthew’s] own house” (5:29) to honor Jesus. Yet this was no elitist event. It was just Matthew’s friends—people who were deemed to be social outcasts.

As we saw in previous lessons, Andrew’s and Philip’s first impulse after answering Jesus’ call was to find their closest friends and introduce them to the Savior. Matthew did exactly the same. He was so thrilled to have found the Messiah that he wanted to introduce Jesus to everyone he knew. So he held a large banquet in Jesus’ honor and invited them all.

Of course, this did not escape the notice of the scribes and the Pharisees. They were outraged that Jesus would celebrate anything with these kinds of people. So they approached His disciples and said, “How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mark 2:16). Jesus replied, “Those who are well

THE PHARISEES' COMPLAINT

Matthew's response to Jesus' call was to invite the Lord to a dinner party in his home where he could introduce his former comrades to Christ. For the Pharisees, this was outrageous. In their minds, consorting with outcasts on any level—merely speaking to them—was bad enough. But eating and drinking with them implied a level of friendship that was absolutely abhorrent (see Luke 7:34; 15:2; 19:7).²

have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (verse 17).

Matthew recognized his need. As a tax collector, he knew his greed, sin, and betrayal of his own people. Even though he had been excluded from the synagogues, he knew the Old Testament well. (In fact, he quotes from it more than the three other Gospel writers combined.) He had surely also heard the fantastic stories about Jesus as he sat in his tax booth day after day. Matthew's tortured soul had finally yielded to the truth about himself: Deep down inside, he was a Jew with an undeniable spiritual hunger.

All these things produced a divine readiness that prepared him to drop everything without a second thought—including a lucrative career—and devote himself to Jesus. Forever grateful for forgiveness and a fresh start, Matthew humbly embraced the outcasts and ministered to the Jews in Israel and abroad for years until, according to early tradition, he was martyred for his faith. In every way, he gave his all for Christ.

- Read Luke 19:1–10. Zacchaeus was also a despised tax collector. What parallels do you see between his story and the story of Matthew's calling? What new perspective did Zacchaeus gain after his encounter with Jesus?

- Read Luke 18:10–14. This parable from Jesus might recount a real-life incident. What did the tax collector recognize about his condition? How did Jesus use this story to contrast his humble attitude with the prideful attitude of the Jewish religious leaders?

- Read Luke 15:1–7. What was the complaint of the scribes and Pharisees? How did Jesus respond to their complaint through the parable that He told?

- What does Matthew's story reveal about the importance of being honest about your sinful condition? What blessing will you receive when you approach God with a repentant heart?

Thomas's Courageous Heart

While the final disciple in the second group is typically nicknamed "Doubting Thomas," this isn't the most accurate label for the one also known as Didymus (which means "the twin"). He was a better man, with a better heart, than most give him credit for being. However, he could at times be an "Eeyore." He was a worrier

and brooder who was always anticipating the storm cloud to come. Pessimism seems to have been more of a struggle for him than doubt. Still, commendable aspects of his character shine through in the one story told about him.

John reports that Jesus had just departed Jerusalem due to threats against his life by the Jewish religious authorities. He traveled with His disciples into the wilderness, where He could minister unhindered (see John 10:39-42). While he was there, a message arrived from Mary and Martha, the sisters of his close friend Lazarus, that he was ill. The sisters, knowing how much Jesus loved their family, anticipated He would hurry back to heal their brother.

Meanwhile, the disciples were concerned because Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived in Bethany, a town located on the outskirts of Jerusalem. If Jesus went there, His enemies were sure to find out, and that would put both His life and the lives of the disciples in jeopardy (see 11:1-3). So we can imagine their relief when Jesus said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (verse 4). *Tragedy averted*, they mistakenly thought. *Jesus is staying put since Lazarus isn't going to die.*

What the disciples didn't understand was that Lazarus *was* going to die and that Jesus *did* plan to go to Bethany. He just wasn't returning there right away. He waited where He was a few extra days so that Lazarus was already dead for four days before He arrived. He then announced His intent to the disciples to return to Judea (see verses 5-7).

The disciples, understandably, thought this was bad idea. They collectively said to Jesus, "Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone You, and are You going there again?" (verse 8). Remember, they thought that Lazarus was on the road to recovery. So Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him" (verses 14-15).

This is when Thomas spoke up: "Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with Him'" (verse 16). Here is what we often miss about Thomas. He was indeed expecting catastrophe if they returned to Bethany. Yet, in his firm devotion to Christ, he was still courageously willing to go there. He was resolved to die with Jesus rather than forsake Him. For him, to live without his Lord was inconceivable.

Thomas's bravery evidently strengthened the other disciples, for they all decided to return to Bethany, where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. What the disciples feared did not occur at this time, for it was not in God's timing yet for

Jesus to die. However, the Pharisees learned of Jesus' actions and began to plot how to put Him to death (see verses 17-53).

- Read John 11:5-11. The disciples were rightly concerned that returning to Bethany would put Jesus' life in danger. However, Jesus was not willing to skulk around like a criminal—He would do His work in the bright light of the day. Why did Jesus feel such freedom to return to Jerusalem? Who did He say is the one who is actually in danger of stumbling?

- Read John 11:12-16. How might an optimist have responded to Jesus' announcement that He was going to journey to Bethany—especially after hearing His preceding illustration?

- Read John 14:1-7. Jesus knew what the disciples would soon face. So why did He say that the disciples' hearts need not be "troubled"?

- Thomas had a courageous heart in spite of his pessimistic outlook. What are some of the ways that God had called you to be courageous for Him?

Thomas's Renewed Hope

We get one further picture of Thomas in a story told at the end of John's Gospel. After Jesus' death, the disciples gathered together for support and out of "fear of the Jews" (John 20:19). Everyone was there except Judas (who had hanged himself after betraying Christ) and, for some reason, Thomas (see verse 24). Suddenly, even though the doors and windows were shut, "Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, 'Peace be with you'" (verse 19).

Why wasn't Thomas there? Possibly he was so grief-stricken that he just wanted to be alone. Nonetheless, his friends came looking for him, and when they found him, they said, "We have seen the Lord" (verse 25). But Thomas, ever the pessimist, wasn't going to be convinced so easily. He told them plainly, "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" (verse 25).

This is why this disciple of Jesus has come to be known as "Doubting Thomas." But we shouldn't be so hard on him. What set Thomas apart from the other disciples was not that his *doubt* was greater but that his *sorrow* was greater. In truth, *all* of the disciples were slow to accept that Jesus had risen. They *all* had to see Jesus in the flesh before they believed.

Eight days later, Jesus appeared to the disciples again, and this time Thomas was with them (see verse 26). Jesus 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" (verse 27). Jesus understood Thomas's doubt and sympathized with his uncertainty.

THE COMPASSION OF CHRIST

Thomas erred because he was wired to be a pessimist. But it was the error of a profound love. It was provoked by grief, brokenheartedness, uncertainty, and the pain of loneliness. No one could feel the way Thomas felt unless he loved Jesus the way Thomas loved Him. So Jesus was tender with him. He understands our weaknesses (see Hebrews 4:15). So He understands our doubt. He sympathizes with our uncertainty. He is patient with our pessimism. And while recognizing these as weaknesses, we must also acknowledge Thomas's heroic devotion to Christ, which made him understand that it would be better to die than to be separated from his Lord. The proof of his love was the profoundness of his despair.³

Thomas's melancholy melted away at the sight of Jesus standing in his midst. He cried out, "My Lord and my God!" (verse 28). In that moment, he was transformed into a great evangelist. Shortly after, he was filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and empowered for ministry. Ancient accounts state that he took the gospel as far as India and was martyred by being run through with a spear. If this account is true, it is a fitting end for one whose faith came to fruition when he saw the spear mark in his Master's side.

- Read Mark 16:9-13. Based on this passage, what did Thomas have in common with other disciples of Jesus?

- Read John 20:19–20. Jesus came and physically stood in the midst of ten of the disciples after His resurrection. What did He show them at this time?

- Read John 20:24–28. Thomas wanted physical proof before he would believe in Jesus' resurrection. How did the Lord meet these specific requests?

- Thomas's declaration that Jesus was his Lord and his God reveals that his hope had been renewed. In what ways do you need Christ to likewise renew your hope in Him today?

CONSIDERING YOUR STORY

Read Hebrews 4:12–16. The Lord not only sees our sin, as He saw in Matthew, but also discerns what is in our hearts and offers forgiveness. He is patient with our pessimism, as He was with Thomas, and sympathizes with us in our uncertainties.

- How has Jesus' redemption, forgiveness, understanding, and compassion personally strengthened your belief in Him and given you renewed hope?

- Think about a time you've shared with someone else that story of how Jesus strengthened you. What difference did it make in that person's life?

- Early church accounts report that both Matthew and Thomas held fast to their hope in Jesus to the very end of their lives. Look up the following additional passages and write down what they say about the hope that you can also have in Christ.

John 3:16-18:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

1 Peter 1:3-6:

APPLYING TO YOUR LIFE

It is remarkable that God not only *could* but *did* use a vile sinner and a melancholy pessimist for His glory. In which area(s) of your life—perhaps your temperament, line of work, or the effects of your past—does He seem to be saying, “I know this is a problem for you, but I am the answer, so acknowledge it and bring it to Me”? Where is He offering you *newness* today?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, I've been holding back and unwilling to let You have Your way because I've been afraid of change, afraid to confess, afraid of others' reactions, and afraid of what following You might cost me. But I want the peace, confidence, and hope that You supply in surrender. Today, I'm choosing to believe in Your thoroughly transforming power. In Your name. Amen.

Notes

1. John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 151–152.
2. John MacArthur, author and general editor, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), notes on Luke 5:29 and Luke 5:30.
3. MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men*, 164.