

## Your own 'Shack' Made of Disappointment with God John 20:19–29

*The Shack* has sold more than ten million copies and has been translated into more than thirty languages. It is now a successful movie yet to be released in NZ. Without giving away the plot, I can tell you that Paul Young's story centers in the greatest grief a parent can experience. The father in the story must decide whether he believes that God is good in a world filled with tragedy. Some reviewers have commended Young for his honesty; others criticise perceived unbiblical doctrine and unusual theological themes in his work. My point today is not to review *The Shack* but to consider its popularity. It is a bestselling novel and now a successful movie because it speaks to something deep inside us all. Every one of us could be carrying pain, guilt, grief, or loss. We can all feel **disappointment with God** for some reason... God was not there when we needed him, we think, or God did not do what we think he should have done. So then, we are left having to decide what we believe about God.

Wm. Paul Young told an interviewer "The Shack" is "the house you build out of your own pain." My "shack", or should I say one in a whole Shanty town full of them, is the loss of many key people and relationships as a younger man i.e. my parent's deaths after putting so much into each of them in earlier years, watching them each suffer until they died. To this day, they do not know what I ended up doing with my life, my call to ministry, marriage, and children. They would have been older loving grandparents, if they had still been alive. That's me and my Shack.

Now it is your turn. Where are you disappointed with God? Name your "shack," then we'll ask Jesus to speak to you and me at that very point today.

This morning we will meet one of Jesus' apostles, the man history calls "Doubting Thomas", and we will learn that his story is our story today.

### **Meet Thomas**

No one in the Bible has been more misnamed by history than "doubting Thomas" when, "Courageous Thomas", or "Honest Thomas" would be far more appropriate, especially when we read what the bible says about him.

**Thomas was courageous.** He first appears in the Lazarus story (John 11:1-16). Jesus had resolved to visit his friend at Bethany, very close to

Jerusalem. By this time, the authorities were already looking for him; twice earlier, he had nearly been stoned to death (John 8:59; 10:31).

To go to Bethany "seemed a suicidal act of recklessness," as commentator William Barclay notes. Lazarus had already died, making their trip even more useless. Then Thomas spoke for the first time in Scripture: *"Let us also go, that we may die with him"* (John 11:16). He wanted to go to Bethany, not because he expected a good ending, but quite the opposite. He did not want his Lord to die in Jerusalem alone. That's Courageous Thomas, now let's meet...

***Honest Thomas - He was honest. [John 14:3-6]***

Jesus was teaching his disciples in the Upper Room, instructing them about his impending death and what lay beyond. He assured them, *"If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going"* (John 14:3-4).

Thomas may have spoken for them all or just for himself: *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* (v. 5). He was courageous enough to be honest with Jesus. The result was one of the most significant statements in all of literature: *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (v. 6). So it was then that Jesus redeemed his honest question with immortal truth.

***Courageous, Honest Thomas who [He] insisted on personal faith.***

When Jesus had been raised on Easter Sunday, he appeared to his disciples through locked doors. But Thomas was not there: *"Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord'"* (John 20:24-25a).

Much has been made of his absence from the disciples group. It may be that Thomas was sick, or had to tend to an ill parent, or had something else he had to do. His absence though was apparently not a complete departure from the faith, for he and the disciples talked soon after. Nothing in the text indicates that they had to go find him and bring him back; their conversation seems natural-normal. He simply was not there on what history calls Easter Sunday. And we do not know why. Later, when the disciples told him of Jesus' resurrection, he responded with the statement which has earned him forever the nickname...

"Doubting Thomas": *"Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe"* (John 20:25b).

Thomas was not willing to accept the group opinion.

He had to see and experience the evidence personally.

He insisted on primary faith, not secondary trust.

This is a position worth following today. Paul criticized the Corinthians for having "milk" rather than "meat" in their faith: *"I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?"* (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). Milk is liquid not solid. Their faith was second-hand and immature. Thomas was not willing to settle for such.

Note that Jesus honoured his request. *"Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although 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, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe'"* (Jn 20:26-27).

Now Jesus invitation elicited this response: *"Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'"* (v. 28).

John does not say that Thomas did in fact poke his fingers in the holes of the wounds or touch Jesus' resurrected body, though he could have. And...

Jesus was not offended by the thought of Thomas's request, as though it was sinful in some way. To the contrary, he calls us to love him with all our minds, the very place where doubt takes hold (Matthew 22:37).

His Heavenly Father invites us to "reason together" (Isaiah 1:18).

God wants us to know him individually and personally.

As a result, we find Thomas later with the disciples where:

*"Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together"* (John 21:2). Thomas insisted on personal faith-knowing Christ individually and personally. Which leads to our application...

**Thomas and us:** The Bible is filled with doubters. Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, doubting God's commandment regarding the forbidden fruit; Abraham doubting God, and his wife Sarah laughing at her Lord; Moses doubting him at the burning bush; the children of Israel doubting him and wandering for a generation in the wilderness as a result. Which tells us... Thomas was not the first to have spiritual doubts, or the last. Even after they met the risen Lord, *"the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted"* (Matthew 28:16-17). Every one of us has been a Doubting Thomas at some point in our spiritual lives. Frederick Buechner is right when he said: "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." Let us be real then--we all have doubts! To prove it- even if it is only to doubt this statement- that is to have a doubt about doubts. And questions like this are part of every human experience.

### **Why are doubts so common to Christian faith?**

Because Christianity is relationship and no relationship can be proven. All relationships require a commitment that transcends or goes above and beyond the evidence in order to become self-validating. For instance: You cannot prove that you should get married until you get married; You cannot prove that you should have children until you have children; You cannot prove you should study at a particular university or school or take a certain job or trust a certain friend until you do. That is just the way relationships work.

Jesus said we are to love the Lord our God, and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–39). It's all relationship. And every relationship is founded on trust, on faith, never on sight. Seeing is never believing. So, what do we do when we doubt our relationship with God? And I say Not if, but when?

**One:** Be honest about your questions.

Thomas refused to accept second-hand faith. He wanted what each of us should want—a personal encounter with a personal God. Consider this amazing church in the book of Acts: "The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). With this result: "Many of the Jews believed, as did a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men" (v. 12).

**Two:** Take your doubts to God.

When the risen Christ appeared to Thomas, he invited his doubting apostle to examine the evidence of his crucifixion and trust him as the resurrected Lord. Thomas's response can be translated literally from the Greek, "You are the Lord of me and the God of me."

He would spend the rest of his life giving the world what Jesus gave to him. He was with the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 1:13). After the Spirit filled his life and soul, he became a missionary for his Lord. Reliable tradition teaches that Thomas eventually made his way to India, where he is still considered that church's patron saint. St. Thomas Mount is named for him there. In heaven, "the walls of the city had twelve foundations, and on them twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Rev 21:14). Of these, Thomas is one. His name is on the foundation of the City of God today.

If you and I will bring our honest doubts and disappointments to God and seek a personal, transforming experience with his Son, our Lord will use our minds and us for his glory. As in the example of these four people:

1. Francis Collins was an atheist who became convinced of the truth of Christianity by studying the scientific evidence for the faith. He is now head of the National Institutes of Health and arguably the best-known scientist in America.
2. Josh McDowell was a convinced agnostic who prepared a paper in college that would disprove the Christian faith. His research instead led him to faith in Jesus. He has written international bestsellers defending the Christian faith and addressed more than 25 million people with the gospel.
3. C. S. Lewis grew up in a nominally Christian home before becoming an atheist under the influence of a brilliant atheistic tutor. His friendship with J. R. R. Tolkien, author of the *Lord of the Rings* series, was instrumental in bringing him to belief in God's existence and eventually to saving faith. His books have been translated into more than 30 languages and sold millions of copies. He is widely considered the most important theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To wrap things up this morning it is time for you to:

1. Name your "Shack";
2. Tell God about it;
3. Ask God to speak to you at the point of your doubts and disappointment;
- & 4. Know that God loves you more than you can possibly imagine.

This is the promise, and the invitation, of God.