

# Faith and Empiricism

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John 20:24-25

*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."*

I'm an expert at believing what I see. How about you? For 55 years I have practiced this skill of observation, and it is the one thing I can say I am very consistent in doing. I can believe what I see.

Don't forget I'm from Missouri. We from the Show-Me state have a remarkable stubbornness to **not** believe unless we can visually corroborate the evidence. We don't put as much stock into the sense of hearing because anyone can say what he likes regardless if it is true or not. A first-grade teacher sent a note home with her students on the first day of school that said, "I promise not to believe everything your child says goes on at home if you promise not to believe everything your child says goes on at school." Life has taught us that you can't believe everything you hear.

However, with computer animation and sophisticated photography one has to exercise some caution even with what he sees. My father told me repeatedly, "Believe nothing of what you hear and only half of what you see." Now it's pretty sad times when a Missourian can only believe half of what he sees, but that is a testament to the deceptive age in which we live. But, generally speaking, your vision is reliable, and if you see it, you can take it to the bank and believe it.

Thomas was simply doing what a good scientist does. He wanted to run empirical tests to prove Jesus was alive from the dead. He said, "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." That's what a good scientist would do. That's what empiricism is, only believing something is true if you can observe it through experience or experimentation.

Can't you sympathize with doubting Thomas? Just a little bit? It's not that Thomas doubted that the other apostles saw something or even what they told him, he simply came to a different conclusion. He did not accuse the believing disciples of making up the story nor did he doubt that they saw something. He does not suggest that were hallucinating. I would think it quite impossible for 10 men to have hallucinated the same vision. Most likely Thomas believed they saw the spirit of Jesus, much like they all thought that stormy night on the Galilean Sea when Jesus

walked towards them on the water. They saw something with their physical eyes and reasoned a wrong conclusion. Their minds argued that a man can't walk on water; therefore, what they saw was the spirit of Jesus.

Therefore, Thomas had a logical reason to doubt the conclusion the apostles reached, that they saw the resurrected Lord. He did not believe Jesus had risen from the dead.

Last week we celebrated the Resurrection of Jesus. The Bible tells that on the following Sunday Jesus appeared again to the disciples and this time Thomas was with them. Our focus this morning is not on that appearance of Jesus but on Thomas' refusal to believe what the apostles had told him on the evening of the Resurrection.

Now Thomas shows us:

## **I. The Desire for the Empirical**

Thomas, like all human beings, had a proclivity, an appetite for the empirical. We tend to believe only what the senses tell us. That's innate. That's natural to us. You, just like Thomas, have this desire for empirical data, hard facts you can observe through your senses and without which you find it extremely difficult to believe.

### **A. The Preference of the Physical.**

We prefer that which belongs to the physical realm we can observe through the senses. We had much rather discern and judge by what we can see or touch. For example, we say things like this:

*God is with me if I can see evidences of His presence.*

*God is with me when my life prospers.*

Or we say the opposite,

*I don't believe God is with me because of bad things and difficulties.*

We tend to prefer what we can sense, what we can see and hear. I don't want to have to take things by faith. But why do I not want to live by faith? That's the question I should ask. And if I am honest with myself then I find out I delight more in the flesh than I do in the spirit. We are more in tune with our flesh and the material than we are the spirit and spiritual.

I'm talking to believers right now. Thomas was a disciple of Christ. And, like Thomas, we must readily understand that there is still this struggle between the natural and the spiritual in the believer. Before you were converted, you spent all of your life, up until that point, living by what you could observe—empirical data—but now that you are a Christian, God expects you not to rely

upon the physical but transition into a spiritual way of living and, frankly, that transition is difficult for some of us, slow in coming, and for some it may seem like a lifetime.

We would just rather not have to live by the spiritual. There is that struggle between the flesh and the spirit. C. S. Lewis recognized that in all of us, including Christians. He wrote,

The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.

Lewis recognized there was the physical and there was the spiritual. The temptation for we, His children, is to let the physical take precedence over the spiritual. There has to be a concerted effort to keep that from happening every morning and throughout the day.

## **B. The Preference for the Normal.**

Aren't we creatures of habit? You like to have new and exciting things happen from time to time, we get into ruts and get bored easily, but the truth is, we still like normalcy.

We have a preoccupation with paranormal but we wouldn't live by it for anything. We like normal. Ordinary is just fine. Nothing out of the unexpected. That doesn't mean we don't long for excitement or extraordinary times as long as it goes according to our plans.

For Thomas, Jesus acted outside of his thoughts about the normal. It would have been normal to Thomas that Jesus be the Messiah the way he envisioned. For him, it was not logical to see how a dead Messiah could be a triumphant Messiah.

We all have tasted the bitter fruit of disappointment. Thomas isn't the only one in the world that God has disappointed. God has disappointed us all. We all have unanswered questions. And we all have uttered the most often asked question—"Why?". There are things that have happened or will happen to us that we cannot and will not be able to explain. Empirical data will fail. The eyes will not see nor we will be able to thrust our hand into the wounded side.

We can let such painful experiences shutdown our faith as it did Thomas. We can let it erode our confidence in God's ability or, yes, even His existence. But it does not solve the problem of our disappointment. So what that you're mad at God and refuse to trust Him? That doesn't change your pain. You still hurt. Where then will you turn? To whom will you turn?

The atheist has the same problem. He or she cannot explain the moral dilemma of evil, pain, and suffering. The no-God worldview does not ease anyone's suffering either. In the end they have no one to whom to turn for any comfort or solace. The problem of pain and suffering is equally the problem of the Christian and the non-Christian. It's the problem of every human being. But

at least there is One who can give comfort in our times of disappointment and pain. Jesus had disappointed many of His disciples before He disappointed Thomas. The Bible says these disciples turned and followed Jesus no more. Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also want to go away?” Peter answered Jesus’ question well (one of the few times he answered one of Jesus’ questions well), “Lord, to whom shall we go?” In other words, “There’s no one else to turn to. We have no one else. If we leave You, who else can help us like You? Who else has the words of eternal life?”

Everybody hurts at one point or another and everyone has some pain that they’ve brought with them today. In our case, we have Someone who understands misery, grief, and sorrows. The happy God became a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” It should be enough to know that God knows pain.

Who else are you going to turn to? When disappointment happens, when misery and heartache, sadness, cruelty, viciousness, when all of the terrible things that can happen to one person or a group of persons happen, the Gospel is the only answer. The only answer is that we have a God who has suffered and knows all about it.

I don’t have the answers to why God answers some prayers and other cries for help seem to go unanswered. There were times He stopped death as in the case of the nobleman’s son. But there were times He chose not to stop it as in the case of Lazarus. But I can tell you that He died. Jesus died. It’s not that He couldn’t stop His own death, He wouldn’t stop it. He chose it and suffered it. You have in Jesus someone who knows what you are going through and then some.

That is the hope of the Gospel. That’s what we, Christians, have that no one else has. We have Someone who has suffered far more than we have. God suffered and He died. Think about that the next time you are crying out, “Lord, I don’t understand. I thought You loved me. I don’t understand how you can let these kinds of things happen to the people You loved. I wouldn’t do this to one of my children.” Remember, God knows suffering far more than you know. He embraced it for you when He died.

There is this desire for the empirical, isn’t there? We want the answers we can see and observe and that make sense to us.

### **C. The Preference for the Natural.**

We resist living according to the supernatural. Because living by the supernatural requires dependency upon God that’s what we’re uncomfortable with. Let’s be honest. There are valleys, metaphorically speaking, and there are hard times that God will lead us into that we do not like. That’s why we call them hard. We don’t want to live a life dependent on the supernatural because we don’t want to have to live by faith. We would rather live meagerly by our own hand, than to live a life of supernatural surprise. That’s what it’s like when you live by faith—there’s one supernatural surprise after another. You never know what God will do. He always does it His way, not our way. We prefer living by bread alone and not by every word that proceeds from the mouth

of God. We not only want to know what we are going to eat but know how it comes and when it's coming. Waiting on God is not our usual fare. Empirical evidence seems much easier to us than faith in God.

That's where Thomas found himself.

## II. The Inadequacy of the Empirical

I want to say in all fairness to the empiricist that it is not right nor Christian of us to make fun of all scientific process. Some things can only be discovered and proven by empiricism, the collection of hard data by observation, experience, and experimentation to prove something verifiable. There was no other way to put a man on the moon without empiricism. Medical science rests on the foundation of empirical data. Thus, for Christians to scoff and mock the true scientist whose entire profession is dependent upon the empirical is foolishness. It is no wonder that Christians are considered ignorant and intellectually deficient.

Yet, on the other hand, it is equally wrong for the empirical scientist to deny the reality of certain things that cannot be empirically proven or denied. Science will only work in the field of the observable; it is useless in the field of philosophy and the metaphysical. The empiricist wants us to believe that you cannot believe something to be true unless you can run the hard experiments on it and prove it factual. That's what the scientist wants. The scientist says it's only true, or it's not true, depending upon the experimentations we do to prove it. The only problem with that statement is that it is not empirically verifiable. You can't take that statement and put it in a test tube. You can't run an experiment on it. It's unverifiable because the statement has left the realm of science and moved into the philosophical. You can't run experiments and experience the validity of the statement. It has to be either believed or rejected based upon the metaphysical sciences.

The word *metaphysical* relates to the transcendent or to reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses. When we use the word *metaphysical* we're talking about that which you can't see. You can't run empirical experiments on what is not observable to the eyes and the senses. You can run experiments on some of the effects of the metaphysical that show up in the material world but you certainly can't on the very thing itself.

For example, human thought. Human thought belongs to the realm of reality that is not observable to science. You can't see a human thought; you can only hear its effects. You're listening to the results of my thoughts being communicated but you can't see my actual thought, no more than you can see my actual mind. You can't put a human thought into a test tube or a beaker. We could do brain surgery on you—it may be enlightening what we discover—and explore the parts of your brain, and we could do a CAT scan and see the brain patterns in your head. But we couldn't prove that you've had a single thought today. Does that mean that you haven't had a thought today? I'm looking at one or two of you right now and I'm kind of concerned. But no, not at all. You cannot see the human mind. I didn't say the brain, I said the mind. The mind is part of that metaphysical realm, that part of reality that is unseen but just as real.

Therefore, all that can be known is not always known by empirical data. Empiricism neither proves or disproves God. God is spirit and can only be known by spiritual illumination, which is the process of God making Himself understood to a person.

That's why Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Except you be born again, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven." Why could he not see it? Because it's not a physical, observable realm, it's in the spiritual realm and nobody can see the spiritual realm unless God regenerates him or her. Unless God quickens them and makes their spirit, the spiritual organ, be able to see.

The physical eye is the physical organ of sight but the spirit is the spiritual organ by which you can see and hear in the spiritual realm where God is. Until God and His mercy does this miracle called regeneration, the new birth, and gives you a spirit that is able to perceive the spiritual, God will never be reality to you. He will be fact in your brain that you can believe or He can be in your brain a fantasy, a myth, a legend that people falsely and wrongly believe in, but either way you cannot know God apart from the Spirit. For the natural man does not know the things of God for they are spiritually known, discerned. The Spirit has to reveal that and He can only do that to the new heart.

The empirical data will not help us altogether. What I want us to do is get to the heart of the matter.

### **III. The Failure to Trust Jesus**

It's not right to say that Thomas said he would not believe unless he could see. That is not all he said. He also said he would not believe unless he could touch, "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." In other words, "I won't believe my eyes only." A good scientist will not believe a hypothesis is true on the basis of one experiment. He added another sense.

It's interesting that Jesus said Thomas' problem was not whether Thomas could or could not see or touch or not touch. The problem was neither. Our Lord told Thomas that his problem was not sensual or physical but spiritual—Thomas had a faith failure. Look at verse 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." (John 20:27)*

Jesus did not refuse to let Thomas touch Him. "Thomas, you're not going to touch Me. You're going to have to accept Me by faith." He could have said that. I mean, has Jesus appeared to you? Has Jesus let you touch His side or put your fingers in the wounds of His hands? Did He do that when He saved you? Well, He could have been fair about it, don't you think? How fair was it to let Thomas see and touch and not us? He could have told Thomas, "I'm not going to let you touch Me. In fact, I'm not even going to appear to you. You just have to take it by faith."

Faith is not opposed to logic or reason. Jesus actually appealed to it. God is both a logical and reasoning being. And it is not true that you must sacrifice reason to be a person of faith. Faith rests on evidence, but the evidence is not always empirical. Faith demands reasoning, "Come let us reason together," says the Lord. We can know God exists through the power of reasoning. But there is more to reality than just the intellect. We, as persons, are more than just our reason.

Let me give you another example. I am in love with my wife. I am as certain of this as I am of the fact that I have spent the last 22 years as the pastor of this church. However, I cannot prove that I love Karen. My actions may demonstrate that I love her but they do not prove that love exists in the heart for her. A man can go through the motions of love but not truly love. I cannot give you an equation for love by which you could run the proper experiments and see love. Therefore, my wife and you from what you see deduce that I love her. Through reason you deduce that I love her, but that is an act of faith that makes you believe that I love her because you cannot see what is really in my heart. Blaise Pascal said, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." Therefore, reason can only take you so far with God. At some point faith must go beyond reason and take you the distance with God. You've got to have faith. It's the spiritual organ that only operates in the realm of the Spirit.

Thomas doubted what Jesus had said was going to happen, even though everything had happened up to the point of the resurrection just as Jesus prophesied. This is a very important point. Thomas had a problem with Jesus. If you're struggling in your faith this morning, you better be paying attention. You may not like what I'm about to do because it's going to expose you. But you need to hear the truth and the truth, if you'll believe it, will set you free.

Yes, Thomas had a faith problem, but a faith problem is nothing more than the revelation that you have a problem with the person. That is what unbelief is. If faith in a person is deeming the person not only trustworthy but capable of doing what you trust him or her to do, then unbelief has to be a judgment that the person is either not trustworthy or capable of doing as promised or both. Thomas's problem is not just a problem of faith, it's a problem he had with Jesus.

Unbelief can exist even in the face of evidence. Just because Thomas saw Jesus that night doesn't guarantee he would believe, which proves that the problem is not empirical but spiritual. Note what Jesus said after He showed Thomas the empirical evidence he wanted, "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" (John 20:27). Even after the empirical data has been witnessed and observed, then Jesus still must command Thomas to stop his unbelief and believe.

We wrongly believe that if we could have lived when Jesus was on the earth and saw His miracles we would find it easier for us to have great or strong faith today. But that is simply not true. That's not the way faith works. In the end faith is more than intellect, it is a gift from God. The majority that saw Jesus' miracles rejected Him as their Messiah proving that faith is the result of the activity of God granting, giving faith. The human heart is so hard that it will reject the empirical

evidence that proves the power of God in order to remain in control. Hence Thomas's problem and mine when I am struggling to believe.

It's a spiritual problem. Who is in charge of Michael? That's the whole problem. Jesus made an interesting statement in John 7. It's often overlooked and hardly ever talked about because it's one statement that in a broader discourse and it's somewhat complex in its structure.

*"If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority." (John 7:17)*

The heart of the problem is a problem with the heart. Jesus says, "If anyone wills to do His will." *If anyone wills*. If a person really wants to do what God wants him to do, then God will make sure that person knows that Jesus' teaching is from God. Jesus puts a provision to faith. What's the provision? If you *want* to do God's will.

May I restate that to its simplest form? *If you want to love God*. Jesus said, "If you love Me then you will keep My commandments." So "if you want to do the Father's will" means "if you love God." Even faith has to have a basis, and the basis is love of God.

What Jesus is saying to Thomas when He says "Stop your unbelief and start believing Me," is, "Do you really love Me? Because if you love Me you will trust me and if you trust Me you won't need empirical data." Beloved, God has made a promise to you in this verse. He is saying, "If you really love Me and you want to please Me, I will make sure you know My will. I will make sure you know that you know that it's real. I will insure that you will have spiritual reality in your life. If you really love Me and you want to do what I want you to do, then I will give you the certainty of my will." This is the proof of whether you love God or not—you willing do what He says. This is the essence of what Jesus said to Thomas. "It's not about whether you can touch or see or do your experiments. The issue is do you really love Me to the degree you will believe and trust in Me despite what you see or hear?"

Beloved, we have an enemy who can manipulate the material and the physical and he will do all he can do to contradict God's Word in the observable realm. On top of that, because he too is spirit—Satan and all his demons are angelic spirits—they too can work in the spiritual realm. Jesus is saying to Thomas, "If you really want to know Me and believe Me, you have to love Me and want to do My will."

According to Romans 1:21, men chose to resist the knowledge of God because their hearts rebelled. Believing the lie, they worshipped and served the creature instead of the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. Worship, worship, worship. What does that word mean? It doesn't mean bowing down before golden statues. Worship is what you love, what you treasure, what you adore—that's what you worship. They believed the lie because they didn't want to love God. By rejecting this man rejected the knowledge of God and by rejecting the knowledge of God man lost the ability to know God.



Do you hear what the text is saying to you? The only way to know God is to bring yourself in loving submission to God. We can plead with the lost man or woman to give their life to Jesus. We can make all of the metaphysical and philosophical arguments that are sound and reasonable but they will continue in their unbelief. There is one thing necessary, and that is the Spirit of the Living God to grant that person a loving submission to God.

You can call yourself a Christian until the day is long and the night is dark or, as the old farmer said, until the cows come home. You can say you're a Christian. You may have been catechized, baptized, religionized, and still miss God and heaven. The empirical, the intellectual, the reasoned arguments, all of the things you believe means nothing unless you have lovingly submitted to Jesus. All you have is a head stored with facts and figures and knowledge. Please listen—you have no right to say you are a follower of Jesus if you are not willing to lovingly submit yourself to Him. When you lovingly submit to Him it means you believe Him, you really trust Him and His Word, His commandments and when He says, "This is the way I want you to walk, walk therein, and be delighted that this is the only way of joy."

When I struggle with my faith, the struggle isn't really, "Can I believe Jesus is trustworthy or that He can do what He said He can do?" the struggle is whether or not I want to submit. Do I want to bring myself lovingly under submission or do I love me and the control of me more than I love Jesus? That's the whole issue.

We have been given senses and intellect and reasoning and they do help us to navigate in this physical, material realm in which we live. In the physical realm, seeing is believing, but equally true in the spiritual realm: believing is seeing. That's what Jesus said to Thomas. "Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe." Why? Because they have seen! In fact, you see more in the spiritual than you do with the physical. The spiritual reality always trumps and takes precedence over the physical because the physical comes from the spiritual.

If you're struggling with your faith today, lovingly submit to Jesus. Willingly, joyfully embrace His will for your life and God will make sure you understand what His will is and that it's true. He doesn't want you flying in the dark guessing. He doesn't want you, like a pilot in the dark, with no instrumentation or navigational equipment, trying to find your way through the pitch-blackness of night. He wants you to have a proper, balanced sense of reality and He grants it. How does He grant it? Through the realm of the spirit by faith.

If you're not a Christian today, I suggest to you this and only this: That you humble yourself before God and ask Him for a heart that would love Him. Ask Him for a heart. You can't change your heart—it's too hard. The nuclear scientist cannot penetrate the hardness of the human heart. There is no weapon formed by man that can change the heart. No, only God can. And He will. He will if you really want Him. He will not reject you. Call to Him. Ask Him to give you the eyes of faith and you will see and you will believe. Amen.