

3. John noted that Thomas wasn't present when Jesus appeared to the Eleven that first evening, but they joyfully reported to him that they had seen the Lord and He was indeed raised from the dead just as He promised. Thomas, however, was unpersuaded and insisted that he'd have to see and touch Jesus before he could possibly believe that this was true (20:24-25). It wasn't that he doubted the other disciples' sincerity and conviction; their enthusiasm told him that they believed what they were telling him. But surely they'd only experienced some sort of vision of Jesus, not His resurrected person. Thus Thomas mirrored his ten counterparts: His reaction to their words was essentially the same as their initial reaction to Jesus' appearance. They needed tangible proof of His resurrection every bit as much as Thomas did (ref. again 20:20). And so, while Thomas is often singled out as especially prone to doubt and disbelief (cf. 11:14-16, 14:1-5), he arguably had more reason to disbelieve than his counterparts did; he doubted based on their verbal testimony while they doubted the testimony of their own eyes. At the same time, Thomas imposed a greater requirement for his belief than the other disciples did: They believed when the Lord showed them His hands and side; Thomas predicated his belief on actually touching Jesus and verifying His wounds with his own hands.
- a. Thomas insisted that he needed tangible proof to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead and the Lord left him with his doubts for an entire week. He could only listen and ponder while the other disciples shared their joy and excitement over their encounter with the risen Messiah. Thomas must have felt marginalized and deeply frustrated as the days passed; if the Lord was indeed alive, why didn't He come to them? Didn't He say He would return and be with them forever?

Finally on the eighth day the doubts and questions were put to rest. As before, the disciples were gathered together in a house with the doors secured, but this time Thomas was with them. So Jesus again suddenly appeared and issued His same greeting of peace (20:26). Jesus then turned to Thomas and directed him to handle Him in precisely the manner he'd insisted upon to the other disciples a week earlier (cf. vv. 25, 27). The point was clear: Though He hadn't been visibly present when Thomas expressed his doubt and demands, Jesus was there nonetheless. The resurrected Lord *had* returned to now be with His disciples forever, just as He'd promised before He left them in death (ref. 14:1-3, 18-19).

Thomas had been adamant that he wouldn't accept any claim of Jesus' resurrection until he could personally see Him with his own eyes and touch His wounds. Now, as the Lord stood before him presenting Himself to him in just that way, He challenged Thomas to honor his pledge and embrace the truth: "*Be no longer unbelieving, but believe*" (20:27b).

- b. John recounted that Thomas responded to Jesus' exhortation with the words, "*My Lord and my God.*" He likely said more than this, but John chose to record this single statement as conveying the essence of Thomas' new-found insight and faith. Thomas' affirmation would soon form the heart of the Church's confession of Jesus the Messiah and perhaps this is why John, writing many decades after this episode occurred, chose to capture Thomas' profession of faith in this way.

Interestingly, Thomas' confession found a counterpart in the pagan culture of that day. *Lord* and *god* were combined in various contexts, with "god" expressing the idea of divinity and "lord" the corresponding power, authority and dominion. The Roman imperial cult epitomized these ideas and already by Augustus' reign (27 B.C. – 14 A.D.) Caesar was known by the title, "son of god." And though many of Rome's emperors were reluctant to make an open claim to deity (though virtually all were officially deified after their death), Domitian (51-96 A.D.) insisted that he be addressed as *dominus et deus* – "lord and god," even signing imperial documents with that title. Domitian was unusually transparent in his hubris and audacity, but every Roman emperor regarded himself as divine in some sense as well as the supreme lord of the world. This was the precisely the reason the *gospel* – the "good news" that the one true God had inaugurated His reign over the world in the person of His enthroned Son – provoked such outrage and fierce retaliation (cf. Acts 2:22-36, 10:1-37, 17:1-8, 19:23-41).

It's entirely possible John had the Roman imperial cult in mind when he recorded Thomas' response. This is all the more likely if John's gospel was penned during Domitian's rule as many scholars believe. Given that Domitian's subjects addressed him as *dominus et deus noster*: "our lord and our god," it seems impossible that any late first-century reader of John's gospel wouldn't make the connection. What is indisputable, though, is that John specifically identified Thomas as the last of the Eleven to acknowledge the resurrected Messiah but the first to articulate the significance of His resurrection and what it means to believe in Him (cf. Acts 2:32-36). Again, Thomas' declaration anticipated the Church's confession of faith in Jesus, the Son of God. In the words of Raymond Brown, "*it is the supreme christological pronouncement of the Fourth Gospel.*"

But it's important to recognize that this "christological pronouncement" was a preeminently *Jewish* pronouncement. Thomas identified Jesus as his Lord and God in accordance with their Israelite meaning and connotations:

*Lord* ("Adonai") is a scriptural title often applied to men and angels to show honor, respect, deference or submission (cf. Genesis 18:12, 23:6, 3:1-15; Zechariah 1:7-9, 4:1-5). When used of Israel's God, it identified Him as the supreme majesty, authority and ruler over the house of Israel, but also over the nations and the entire created order by virtue of His status as Creator (cf. Deuteronomy 10:17; Joshua 3:11; Psalm 8:1). The Jews appropriately employed this title in the place of the unutterable sacred name ("YHWH") when reading aloud from the Scriptures. (The English title *Jehovah* results from the combination of *YHWH* and *Adonai*.)

Israel's Scriptures also apply this title to the *Messiah*, whom it regards as a man – a son of David – appointed to embody and exercise Yahweh's authority and rule as His King over all the earth (Psalm 110; Malachi 3:1). Messiah was coming to fulfill Yahweh's promise regarding His return, kingdom and reign. In Him, Yahweh's lordship would be perfected.

The title *God* (“Ei” or “Elohim”) also has various applications in the Old Testament scriptures. Like *adonai*, it is used of angels and men (1 Samuel 28:13; Psalm 82:6-7), but also frequently of the false gods men fashion and worship (Genesis 31:30; Exodus 12:12; Leviticus 19:4; Isaiah 44:9ff). The title has broad signification when applied to Israel’s God. It speaks to His deity, transcendence, sovereignty, power, goodness, faithfulness, etc. Most importantly, in all of its connotations this title identifies Israel’s God as the one true God – *God in distinction from all so-called gods and idols as the objects of human imagination, desire, worship and service*. Hence the Shema as Israel’s supreme confessional prayer: “*Here, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one*” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

Israel’s Scriptures likewise apply this title to the coming messianic figure. As he would embody and execute Yahweh’s supreme lordship as the King of kings (Isaiah 9:1-7; Zechariah 9:9-10), so He would somehow embody Yahweh’s return to Zion. *In His Messiah, God would become truly and everlastingly God to Israel and the world of men* (cf. Psalm 45:6-7 with Hebrews 1:8-12; also Isaiah 40:1-11; Jeremiah 31:31-34, 32:38-40, 33:14-16; Ezekiel 34:11-31, 37:15-28).

- c. These ideas were bound up in Thomas’ recognition and confession of Jesus as his *Lord and God*. He wasn’t acknowledging Jesus’ authority and deity in some abstract or generic sense, but confessing that the man standing in front of him was indeed the resurrected, glorified Messiah – the embodiment of Yahweh, Israel’s God, and the One in whom all of Yahweh’s purposes, promises and faithfulness are “yes and amen”; *the One in whom God has become fully and truly God in relation to His creation and especially His image-sons*.

This is what it means to “believe in Jesus” and the Lord acknowledged Thomas’ faith with a profound observation: *Thomas believed as a result of seeing, but there is blessedness for those who believe without seeing* (20:29). Several things are important to note. First, Jesus wasn’t denying the blessedness of those who saw Him and believed; indeed, all such disciples enjoyed a unique privilege (cf. Luke 10:21-24 with John 14:1-4, 18-19, 16:16-22). Rather, He was highlighting a different form of blessedness associated with a new phenomenon of faith – faith grounded, not in His bodily presence, but His presence *in His Spirit*. Jesus previously instructed His disciples concerning this new era of presence, witness and faith associated with the Spirit (cf. 14:1-28, 15:26-16:15, 17:12-26 with 20:21-23) and now He was insisting that this era would have its own blessedness. This affirmation was important first because it pointed to the fact that Jesus’ bodily presence in the world would not continue indefinitely. Soon there would be no possibility of a faith derived from seeing. But this wouldn’t mean either the end of faith or the end of faith’s blessedness. Those who saw the resurrected Messiah enjoyed a unique privilege, but not a unique blessing of knowledge and intimacy. For the Spirit of Jesus would take the things of Jesus – His life, mind, instruction, encouragement, consolation, etc. – and impart them to the disciples who had not seen Him. Like their first counterparts who beheld the risen Messiah, they, too, would know “joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:3-9).