

Articles by Friedrich August Tholuck

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Doubting, then Believing

(The following article is an excerpt of a sermon preached by Friedrich August Tholuck. He occupied the chair of theology at the University of Halle, Germany, from 1826 to 1877. This was a period in history when rationalism was growing rapidly in Europe. Tholuck was an avowed evangelical, and unashamedly identified himself with those who were committed to that position.)

Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed; blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed (John 20:29).

Thomas had a peculiarity with regard to which one really must think that it was of such a character as to render him unfit for the kingdom of God. He belonged, indubitably, to that class of men who, before they can believe, must first see with their bodily eyes. Scoffers talk of the apostles as if they had been the most credulous people in the world. Now, of Thomas at least they cannot say this, for he was evidently by no means easy of belief, but was, on the contrary, one of those cautious and incredulous people who must feel the ground on which they set their foot and who will make no leap over a ditch whose dimensions they have not first duly measured.

It must have been night with Thomas, for if he still cherished hope, it would not have been so difficult for him afterward to have believed. Eight days had passed away; for the believing followers of Christ, days of calm contentment, but for Thomas they had been days of comfortlessness. You are astonished at his skepticism;

be astonished then likewise at his faith, after the Lord had, in infinite condescension, satisfied even the presumptuous demands of his doubt.

Once more Jesus stood in the midst of them with the salutation of peace again upon His lips. The beloved countenance of the Holy One is there before him again, and upon its features the light of the resurrection morning rests. The beloved voice, so often heard before, again falls upon his ear. What need that he should stretch forth his hands to touch his Lord – does not his heart feel Him nigh? Yes, it is He, it is He! Who else could it be but He? And falling on his knees, he cries: "My Lord and My God!"

This expression, in which is summed up all the experience of his heart during those three years which he had passed in his Master's company, was the highest that an Israelite could use. See in it a proof how strong and true the bond was which, in spite of all his disbelief, still knit him to his Savior. See in this a proof that throughout the whole period of his intercourse with the Lord the rays of His divinity must have penetrated and warmed his cold, unbelieving heart. Doubt has lain upon his heart only as a thin layer of earth. And now that the sun puts forth his might, the hidden germ of faith shoots up with power. He had been drawn by the Father to the Son, and that hour completed his spiritual training.

The effect of Thomas's doubting is designed to prevent us from doubting. Thomas doubted thus, that all who doubt as he did might be convinced as he was. If we now turn our eye from Thomas to ourselves, we shall find that it is generally among the circle of the disciples of science that spirits like his are to be found. These often

lack the courage in presence of intellectual difficulties and scruples to make up their minds to perform a heroic act of faith and cut the knot they cannot untie. Young men, are there not many of those unfortunates to be found among you? Whenever you would make a fresh attempt to soar above the world, there is the sword of an intellectual objection, ready to cut the sinews of your heaven-bound wing and bring you down again to the clods of earth. But think not, ye disciples of science, that the sad prerogative of such conflicts is assigned alone to you.

O my friends, if it be true that believing is nothing else than holding to the unseen as if it were seen; and if by nature we are all carnal and therefore cleave to what is seen; then there can be no Christian who has not this fight of faith to fight, for it is indeed nothing else than the struggle of the spirit against the flesh. Has anyone ever been brought from the heart to believe in a Father in heaven, who is reconciled in Christ, without having first had to engage in many a fierce conflict with the thousandfold "No" raised in opposition to that truth by the natural understanding, which pleads the cause of the accusing conscience?

For all of us alike is the history of Thomas recorded for our consolation, that we may learn what a strong and mighty thing faith is, which can triumph over all intellectual scruples, which is capable of making a new man in Christ Jesus; and that we may know that in the school of the Lord Jesus even the most unbelieving natures may be transformed into children of God.

O Lord, look upon us. We believe; help our unbelief!