### “The Gospel of Thomas” by Deacon Joyce Marble for The First Church, October 22, 2023

**Gospel of Thomas 1–6**

These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.

(1) And he said, “Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.”

(2) Jesus said, “Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All.”

(3) Jesus said, “If those who lead you say to you, ‘See, the kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.”

(4) Jesus said, “The man old in days will not hesitate to ask a small child seven days old about the place of life, and he will live. For many who are first will become last, and they will become one and the same.”

(5) Jesus said, “Recognize what is in your sight, and that which is hidden from you will become plain to you. For there is nothing hidden which will not become manifest.”

(6) His disciples questioned him and said to him, “Do you want us to fast? How shall we pray? Shall we give alms? What diet shall we observe?” Jesus said, “Do not tell lies, and do not do what you hate, for all things are plain in the sight of heaven. For nothing hidden will not become manifest, and nothing covered will remain without being uncovered.”

**Today, this message is about what folks are learning in Bible Study, Thursday 10:00 AM Also will be on zoom. Our instructor? Pastor Steve....who holds Master of Art in New Testament studies, Pacific School of Religion; Master of Philosophy, New Testament studies, Drew University; Ph.D., Pauline Theology, University of Durham UK; Master of Theological Studies with emphasis on Ministerial Studies, Boston University School of Theology**.

### **There’s a saying that if you stop learning then you have passed away. Educating yourselves every day is very important.**

**This is what we have read and discussed so far.**

***The Coptic gospel of Thomas in Layman’s terms*** **(According to Biblewise.com)**

**Scholars knew of the existence of the Gospel of Thomas (like so many others) only from comments (usually disparaging) from various Church Fathers and from Greek fragments found in the late 1800’s. That all changed , however, in 1945 with the discovery of an intact Coptic version of this gospel. Leather bound scriptures in a jar that was discovered by farmers in a field. Coptic is the language of the Copts, which represents the final stage of ancient Egyptian. It now survives only as the liturgical language of the Coptic Church.**

**Unlike the Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, which are narratives about the life of Jesus, Thomas is a collection of sayings – 114 of them, to be exact. There are no birth stories, no healings, no conflicts with the authorities, and no crucifixion or resurrection.**

**In these 114 sayings, Thomas transmits the essence of Jesus’ teachings. And what might this be? In a phrase, readers of Thomas’ Gospel are encouraged to find the meaning of life.**

**The sayings are for the most part wisdom sayings – words to the wise or proverbs, if you will. Some are simple: “If a blind person leads a blind person, both will fall into a pit” (s. 34). Some are more challenging: “He who uncovers the significance of these words shall not taste death” (s.1) It is these words that have intrigued scholars ever with many suggesting that “these words” might have been closer to what Jesus actually taught than those which have been recorded in the canonical gospels. (Other scholars , of course, completely refute that concept.)**

**What Is a Gospel?**

Let’s first consider what a “Gospel” is. The word “[gospel](https://www.exploregod.com/explore/articles/what-is-the-gospel)“ (Greek,) means simply “good news” or “favorable report.” It was a term with political overtones often used in the ancient world. The accession of a new leader could be “good news,” as could reports of a military victory.

Early Christians used the word to describe the essential message of and about Jesus—that is, the “good news” of Jesus. Later, “gospel” took on the more technical meaning of a book that gives an account of Jesus’ life. The New Testament has four such gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books belong to the genre of ancient biographies.1 Unlike modern biographies, they stress a person’s words and deeds and are often written to provide readers with an example of how they should live.

**Gnosticism**

Although scholars are divided on the origin, meaning, and extent of Gnosticism in the ancient world, there are a few characteristics that are broadly accepted about who the Gnostics were and what they believed.

“Gnosticism” is a word used today to describe several complex religious–philosophical movements that flourished from the second to the fourth century AD. It is important to realize that Gnosticism is not a single movement; it is a term used to characterize a variety of movements with particular beliefs and practices led by influential leaders in this specific time period.

At the heart of the Gnostic worldview is the belief that the material world is evil and corrupt; in contrast, the spiritual world is good and pristine. This is easy to demonstrate. Take a nice, fresh apple and put it on a table. What happens to it over a few days, a few weeks, a few months? Before long the apple rots and becomes a smelly mess. Repeat the experiment with a piece of iron. Over time the iron rusts, corrodes, and eventually disintegrates. Try the experiment with a twenty-year-old. At twenty, a person is fit and trim; they feel and look well. Fast-forward fifty years and the same person is now old and tired; their once-firm body sags and hurts most of the time. Before long, they have died and their corpses have decomposed.

Graphic, yes, but it proves a point: Everything we can see and touch in this material world suffers the same fate. It corrodes, decays, and eventually disappears.

The Gnostics considered this material world inferior and evil because corruption was constantly at work in it—as anyone could observe. Since this world is so corrupt and transitory, Gnostics reasoned that the Supreme God—whom they considered to be utterly transcendent and unknowable—could not have made the present world. So they posited that creation was the work of a lower, inferior god called the Demiurge. The God recorded in the biblical book of Genesis, therefore, was not the Most High God but an inferior, second-class god.

According to Gnosticism, human beings are good spirits trapped inside of evil material bodies. The good spirit originated in the sublime spiritual realm above. The problem for all people is that in the journey from heaven to earth, people forgot their true origin and nature. The Supreme God answers by sending a Redeemer from the heavenly realm to the world below in order to reveal the truth to those who have fallen into a forgetful sleep.

Salvation, then, depends on receiving that knowledge and being awakened from slumber. It means that when people die, their spirits escape the bonds of this material world and ascend to the heavens to be reunited with the One above. According to Gnostic thinking, the Redeemer had to come to earth in order to reveal the truth to humans, but could not be truly incarnate—that is, enfleshed—because flesh is evil. So Christ just appeared to be human during his earthly sojourn; he was in fact only divine. This is a departure from traditional [Christian](https://www.exploregod.com/explore/articles/what-is-christianity) belief, which states that Jesus was fully human and fully divine.

### ****The Gnostic Gospels****

To one degree or another, the Gnostic Gospels reflect these teachings. Often they appear to rewrite familiar stories with a twist. In some cases they may contain early, independently attested traditions (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas).

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This view of the world is foundational to Gnosticism (the world is a hostile place, people are weighted down here, a heavenly redeemer will redeem all who follow his teachings), but it is also common in most religious thought. Think of the teachings of Buddhism, asceticism, mystical thought, Kabbalah, etc. The Gospel of Thomas bears witness to the fact that at least one aspect of early Christianity was working on this, too. Salvation isn’t something that happens at the end; it is already here. “The kingdom is inside of you and outside you.”

According to Thomas, salvation is not tied to Jesus’ death and resurrection; salvation is tied to gaining insight from Jesus’ words. Jesus does not save us; becoming like Jesus saves us. Jesus is our spiritual guide to this end. When his words are properly understood, we will have eternal life. However, this is not going to be an easy task; it will require constant effort. Nonetheless, those who achieve this goal will rule over all.

With these sayings Jesus attempts to turn his followers’ thoughts from outward piety to what is taking place in the inward man. “If you become my followers, these stones will serve you” (s. 19).

“If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you will kill you” (s.70). Here Jesus seems to be saying that salvation can only be achieved when the inner, spiritual life is fully expressed. “Fortunate are those who have heard the word of the father and have truly kept it” (s.79). “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that person” (s.108).

There are several allegories answering the question: What is the kingdom of God like? Most of the allegories also appear in the Synoptic Gospels. The kingdom is like a mustard seed (s.20) , like the person who sowed good seed (s.57), like the merchant who found a precious pearl and sold all that he had to buy it (s.76) , like the woman who hid yeast in dough and made many loaves of bread (s. 96), like the shepherd who lost one of his sheep and left the 99 to find it (s.107), etc.

However, there are three allegories that do not appear in the Synoptic Gospels. The kingdom is like a woman carrying a jar full of meal who did not notice the crack in the jar, so it all spilled while she carried the jar home; the kingdom is like a man who wanted to kill someone powerful, so he thrust his sword into the wall; the kingdom is like a person who didn’t know he had treasure in his field and sold it to someone else. (It is not always clear what the message is supposed to be in these passages.)

There are several parables: the sower (s. 9), the wedding feast (s.64), and the wicked tenants (s.65). There are multiple sayings from the Sermon on the Mount. When asked who would be their leader after Jesus was gone, he replied: James the Just (Jesus’ brother) (s. 12).

There are also some very obscure passages relating to sexuality and/or women. In saying 21, Mary asks Jesus a question, leading one to assume that she is a follower of Jesus. But then in saying 114, Peter states, “Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life.” Jesus replies, “I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male shall enter heaven’s kingdom.” The good news is that Jesus safeguards Mary’s right to enter the kingdom of heaven. The bad news is that she first must become male!

Scholars have offered several interpretations of this final statement ranging from it being blatantly misogynistic to metaphorical. The first reflects the patriarchal bias of its day; the latter posits that “female” relates to humanity while “male” suggests divinity. According to gnostic thought, all are “female”/human, and then all strive to become “male”/divine. (Even if this were true of gnostic thought, it would have been better if they had used gender-neutral language in making the point!)

Some scholars try to understand it in light of s. 22: “…when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, …then you will enter the kingdom.” In this saying, it appears that all sexuality needs to be overcome. Yet one should not assume, then, that this is an ascetic document since outward signs of piety are not encouraged, i.e., fasting, praying, charity, following the dietary laws, and circumcision.

It is, however, quite clear that, according to the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus came as a person in the flesh to teach people how to change their way of living. He was the vehicle through which these secrets were revealed to those who were worthy, thus enabling them to become like him.

While we have attempted to give a flavor of the sayings, scholars concede that the best way to understand them is to read and reflect upon each one. As one finds the light within, one will become a light for others. This is not a gospel of “works righteousness” vs. “grace”; it is a gospel of “insight.”