

The Book of Thomas the Contender

Translated by John D. Turner

The secret words that the savior spoke to Judas Thomas which I, even I, Mathaias, wrote down, while I was walking, listening to them speak with one another.

The savior said, "Brother Thomas while you have time in the world, listen to me, and I will reveal to you the things you have pondered in your mind.

"Now, since it has been said that you are my twin and true companion, examine yourself, and learn who you are, in what way you exist, and how you will come to be. Since you will be called my brother, it is not fitting that you be ignorant of yourself. And I know that you have understood, because you had already understood that I am the knowledge of the truth. So while you accompany me, although you are uncomprehending, you have (in fact) already come to know, and you will be called 'the one who knows himself'. For he who has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge about the depth of the all. So then, you, my brother Thomas, have beheld what is obscure to men, that is, what they ignorantly stumble against."

Now Thomas said to the lord, "Therefore I beg you to tell me what I ask you before your ascension, and when I hear from you about the hidden things, then I can speak about them. And it is obvious to me that the truth is difficult to perform before men."

The savior answered, saying, "If the things that are visible to you are obscure to you, how can you hear about the things that are not visible? If the deeds of the truth that are visible in the world are difficult for you to perform, how indeed, then, shall you perform those that pertain to the exalted height and to the pleroma which are not visible? And how shall you be called 'laborers'? In this respect you are apprentices, and have not yet received the height of perfection."

Now Thomas answered and said to the savior, "Tell us about these things that you say are not visible, but are hidden from us."

The savior said, "All bodies [...] the beasts are begotten [...] it is evident like [...] this, too, those that are above [...] things that are visible, but they are visible in their own root, and it is their fruit that nourishes them. But these visible bodies survive by devouring creatures similar to them with the result that the bodies change. Now that which changes will decay and perish, and has no hope of life from then on, since that body is bestial. So just as the body of the beasts perishes, so also will these formations perish. Do they not derive from intercourse like that of the beasts? If it, too derives from intercourse, how will it beget anything different from beasts? So, therefore, you are babes until you become perfect."

And Thomas answered, "Therefore I say to you, lord, that those who speak about things that are invisible and difficult to explain are like those who shoot their arrows at a target at night. To be sure, they shoot their arrows as anyone would - since they shoot at the target - but it is not visible. Yet when the light comes forth and hides the darkness, then the work of each will appear. And you, our light, enlighten, O lord."

Jesus said, "It is in light that light exists."

Thomas, spoke, saying, "Lord, why does this visible light that shines on behalf of men rise and set?"

The savior said, "O blessed Thomas, of course this visible light shines on your behalf - not in order that you remain here, but rather that you might come forth - and whenever all the elect abandon bestiality, then this light will withdraw up to its essence, and its essence will welcome it, since it is a good

servant."

Then the savior continued and said, "O unsearchable love of the light! O bitterness of the fire that blazes in the bodies of men and in their marrow, kindling in them night and day, and burning the limbs of men and making their minds become drunk and their souls become deranged [...] them within males and females [...] night and moving them, [...] secretly and visibly. For the males move [...] upon the females and the females upon the males. Therefore it is said, "Everyone who seeks the truth from true wisdom will make himself wings so as to fly, fleeing the lust that scorches the spirits of men." And he will make himself wings to flee every visible spirit."

And Thomas answered, saying, "Lord, this is exactly what I am asking you about, since I have understood that you are the one who is beneficial to us, as you say."

Again the savior answered and said, "Therefore it is necessary for us to speak to you, since this is the doctrine of the perfect. If, now, you desire to become perfect, you shall observe these things; if not, your name is 'Ignorant', since it is impossible for an intelligent man to dwell with a fool, for the intelligent man is perfect in all wisdom. To the fool, however, the good and bad are the same - indeed the wise man will be nourished by the truth and (Ps. 1:3) "will be like a tree growing by the meandering stream" - seeing that there are some who, although having wings, rush upon the visible things, things that are far from the truth. For that which guides them, the fire, will give them an illusion of truth, and will shine on them with a perishable beauty, and it will imprison them in a dark sweetness and captivate them with fragrant pleasure. And it will blind them with insatiable lust and burn their souls and become for them like a stake stuck in their heart which they can never dislodge. And like a bit in the mouth, it leads them according to its own desire. And it has fettered them with its chains and bound all their limbs with the bitterness of the bondage of lust for those visible things that will decay and change and swerve by impulse. They have always been attracted downwards; as they are killed, they are assimilated to all the beasts of the perishable realm."

Thomas answered and said, "It is obvious and has been said, 'Many are [...] those who do not know [...] soul.'"

And the savior answered, saying, "Blessed is the wise man who sought after the truth, and when he found it, he rested upon it forever and was unafraid of those who wanted to disturb him."

Thomas answered and said, "It is beneficial for us, lord, to rest among our own?"

The savior said, "Yes, it is useful. And it is good for you, since things visible among men will dissolve - for the vessel of their flesh will dissolve, and when it is brought to naught it will come to be among visible things, among things that are seen. And then the fire which they see gives them pain on account of love for the faith they formerly possessed. They will be gathered back to that which is visible. Moreover, those who have sight among things that are not visible, without the first love they will perish in the concern for this life and the scorching of the fire. Only a little while longer, and that which is visible will dissolve; then shapeless shades will emerge, and in the midst of tombs they will forever dwell upon the corpses in pain and corruption of soul."

Thomas answered and said, "What have we to say in the face of these things? What shall we say to blind men? What doctrine should we express to these miserable mortals who say, "We came to do good and not curse," and yet claim, "Had we not been begotten in the flesh, we would not have known iniquity"?"

The savior said, "Truly, as for those, do not esteem them as men, but regard them as beasts, for just as beasts devour one another, so also men of this sort devour one another. On the contrary, they are deprived of the kingdom since they love the sweetness of the fire and are servants of death and rush to the works of corruption. They fulfill the lust of their fathers. They will be thrown down to the abyss and

be afflicted by the torment of the bitterness of their evil nature. For they will be scourged so as to make them rush backwards, whither they do not know, and they will recede from their limbs not patiently, but with despair. And they rejoice over [...] madness and derangement [...] They pursue this derangement without realizing their madness, thinking that they are wise. They [...] their body [...] Their mind is directed to their own selves, for their thought is occupied with their deeds. But it is the fire that will burn them."

And Thomas answered and said, "Lord, what will the one thrown down to them do? For I am most anxious about them; many are those who fight them."

The savior answered and said, "What is your own opinion?"

Judas - the one called Thomas - said, "It is you, lord, whom it befits to speak, and me to listen."

The savior replied, "Listen to what I am going to tell you and believe in the truth. That which sows and that which is sown will dissolve in the fire - within the fire and the water - and they will hide in tombs of darkness. And after a long time they shall show forth the fruit of the evil trees, being punished, being slain in the mouth of beasts and men at the instigation of the rains and winds and air and the light that shines above."

Thomas replied, "You have certainly persuaded us, lord. We realize in our heart, and it is obvious, that this is so, and that your word is sufficient. But these words that you speak to us are ridiculous and contemptible to the world since they are misunderstood. So how can we go preach them, since we are not esteemed in the world?"

The savior answered and said, "Truly I tell you that he who will listen to your word and turn away his face or sneer at it or smirk at these things, truly I tell you that he will be handed over to the ruler above who rules over all the powers as their king, and he will turn that one around and cast him from heaven down to the abyss, and he will be imprisoned in a narrow dark place. Moreover, he can neither turn nor move on account of the great depth of Tartaros and the heavy bitterness of Hades that is steadfast [...] them to it [...] they will not forgive [...] pursue you. They will hand [...] over to [...] angel Tartarouchos [...] fire pursuing them [...] fiery scourges that cast a shower of sparks into the face of the one who is pursued. If he flees westward, he finds the fire. If he turns southward, he finds it there as well. If he turns northward, the threat of seething fire meets him again. Nor does he find the way to the east so as to flee there and be saved, for he did not find it in the day he was in the body, so that he might find it in the day of judgment."

Then the savior continued, saying, "Woe to you, godless ones, who have no hope, who rely on things that will not happen!

"Woe to you who hope in the flesh and in the prison that will perish! How long will you be oblivious? And how long will you suppose that the imperishables will perish too? Your hope is set upon the world, and your god is this life! You are corrupting your souls!

"Woe to you within the fire that burns in you, for it is insatiable!

"Woe to you because of the wheel that turns in your minds!

"Woe to you within the grip of the burning that is in you, for it will devour your flesh openly and rend your souls secretly, and prepare you for your companions!

"Woe to you, captives, for you are bound in caverns! You laugh! In mad laughter you rejoice! You neither realize your perdition, nor do you reflect on your circumstances, nor have you understood that you dwell in darkness and death! On the contrary, you are drunk with the fire and full of bitterness. Your mind is deranged on account of the burning that is in you, and sweet to you are the poison and the

blows of your enemies! And the darkness rose for you like the light, for you surrendered your freedom for servitude! You darkened your hearts and surrendered your thoughts to folly, and you filled your thoughts with the smoke of the fire that is in you! And your light has hidden in the cloud of [...] and the garment that is put upon you, you [...]. And you were seized by the hope that does not exist. And whom is it you have believed? Do you not know that you all dwell among those who that [...] you as though you [...]. You baptized your souls in the water of darkness ! You walked by your own whims!

"Woe to you who dwell in error, heedless that the light of the sun which judges and looks down upon the all will circle around all things so as to enslave the enemies. You do not even notice the moon, how by night and day it looks down, looking at the bodies of your slaughters!

"Woe to you who love intimacy with womankind and polluted intercourse with them! Woe to you in the grip of the powers of your body, for they will afflict you! Woe to you in the grip of the forces of the evil demons! Woe to you who beguile your limbs with fire! Who is it that will rain a refreshing dew on you to extinguish the mass of fire from you along with your burning? Who is it that will cause the sun to shine upon you to disperse the darkness in you and hide the darkness and polluted water?

"The sun and the moon will give a fragrance to you together with the air and the spirit and the earth and the water. For if the sun does not shine upon these bodies, they will wither and perish just like weeds or grass. If the sun shines on them, they prevail and choke the grapevine; but if the grapevine prevails and shades those weeds and all the other brush growing alongside, and spreads and flourishes, it alone inherits the land in which it grows; and every place it has shaded it dominates. And when it grows up, it dominates all the land and is bountiful for its master, and it pleases him even more, for he would have suffered great pains on account of these plants until he uprooted them. But the grapevine alone removed them and choked them, and they died and became like the soil."

Then Jesus continued and said to them, "Woe to you, for you did not receive the doctrine, and those who are [...] will labor at preaching [...]. And you are rushing into [...] will send them down [...] you kill them daily in order that they might rise from death.

"Blessed are you who have prior knowledge of the stumbling blocks and who flee alien things.

"Blessed are you who are reviled and not esteemed on account of the love their lord has for them.

"Blessed are you who weep and are oppressed by those without hope, for you will be released from every bondage.

"Watch and pray that you not come to be in the flesh, but rather that you come forth from the bondage of the bitterness of this life. And as you pray, you will find rest, for you have left behind the suffering and the disgrace. For when you come forth from the sufferings and passions of the body, you will receive rest from the good one, and you will reign with the king, you joined with him and he with you, from now on, for ever and ever, Amen."

This translation was made by John D. Turner, excerpted from *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* edited by James M. Robinson, and transcribed for online publication originally at the Gnostic Society Library (gnosis.org).