

A Mother to Many **Acts 9:36-43**

Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner.

Introduction — Our passage for this morning fits well with our observance of Mothers' Day. That's because the woman at its center displays a number of the qualities essential to being a good mom—even though we have no way of knowing if she was ever married or had biological children. Her story takes place in the port city of Joppa (today's Jaffa), located about thirty-five miles from Jerusalem, on the shore of the Mediterranean.

I. Service — Dorcas was a Jewish Christian woman with two names. Her Hebrew name was Tabitha, which is what Peter calls her when she was healed. Dorcas is the Greek translation of that name, and the one by which she was most commonly known. The name literally means "gazelle," and may indicate that she was physically graceful.

Dorcas may have been a spinster, a widow, or even divorced. What does seem clear is that that, at the time of her death, she was unmarried. The woman was also a devout Christian, since Luke describes her as a "disciple." This is significant because **verse 36** is the only place in the New Testament where the feminine form of that Greek word is used. This may well indicate that Dorcas was a leader in the church at Joppa, just as Lydia was in Philippi.

But this woman's prominence did not come from the traits we usually associate with Christian leadership. Apparently she was not a gifted

teacher or administrator. Instead, Dorcas was widely known for having a servant's heart—expressed through her many acts of mercy. Hence, we are told that “she was full of good works and acts of charity [helping the poor]” (v. **36**). That is, Dorcas was not just a gifted woman who cared deeply for the needy, but she had turned this into a way of life—regularly helping people according to what was appropriate both to her capabilities and the needs of those she served.

There is a sense in which each person's life becomes a collection of habits: characteristics, patterns, and actions we do, often without much thought, simply because of repetition. To a great degree, these habits define who we become. In fact, a case can be made that God's judgment of us is largely related to this habitual aspect of our lives. For example, if we are instinctively and continually negative to most people, ideas, and things—what can be called a “critical spirit (cf. **Gal. 5:4-5**)—this flies in the face of the frequent biblical commands to be of good cheer and a source of encouragement. Likewise, if we habitually fail to keep commitments, that reveals a lack of faithfulness.

While you and I tend to emphasize our more spectacular and perhaps one-time accomplishments, it's the larger framework of one's life that is far more significant. Therefore, we each need periodic times of introspection, when we ask ourselves some basic questions: What is the general shape and direction of my life? What toxic habits of both attitude and action have I allowed to influence how I think and what I do? What steps can I take to replace these habits with those that are more beneficial to others and myself?

II. Separation — By habitually serving others in some very practical ways, Dorcas was known and loved by many. But then it all came to a halt, as death suddenly took her out of the picture. We are not given the cause of her demise, although some commentators speculate that the woman's constant toil and emotional strain may have contributed factors. What we do know, however, is that the death of Dorcas was a terrible shock to those who loved and were indebted to her.

Death, of course, is a sobering fact of life with which we all must contend. As **Hebrews 9:27** tells us: “...man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” And though we all know this, it is a shock to see especially good and godly people suffer then be taken

from us. It's even more painful when, as we see it, such folks die prematurely.

Though denial of these realities is never healthy, there are biblical assurances which help us work through our grief:

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, *for you are with me*; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (**Psa. 23:4**).

"Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints" (**Psa. 116:15**).

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (**Jn. 14:1-3**).

And so, an untimely death came to Dorcas. But it was also a Christian death, with all the blessings and benefits afforded to the Lord's people. Even so, that did not alleviate the shock and sorrow experienced by those she left behind.

III. Sorrow — That sorrow was deep and profound. **Verse 38** speaks of the urgent call which went out to Peter for him to come and do something. And when he arrived, the apostle was no doubt impressed by what he saw. There, standing around the body, was an assembly of widows—each of them in tears and displaying tangible evidence of Dorcas's ministries.

"And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them" (**v. 39**).

I'm sure those women were just like us at such a time; thinking and saying things like this: "How can we ever get along without this person?" "She so generous; always doing just the right thing at the right time." Now what will we do?" What they did, of course, was to call for Peter, one of the Lord's apostles—just as the sisters of Lazarus had called for Jesus when their brother died.

By the way, as we examine the background details of the subsequent miracle, the providence of God is evident. First, Peter was in Lydda,

only about 15 miles from Joppa—about a day’s journey, but relatively close. Second, Dorcas did not die in Jerusalem. That’s important because Jewish law required that if someone died there, he or she had to be buried within twenty-four hours. But everywhere else in Palestine, the period was expanded to three full days. And so, Peter could reach Dorcas’s bedside with a day or two to spare.

When Peter got to Joppa, the scene must have impressed him. There was a group of widows surrounding the body, weeping, wailing, and displaying tangible evidence of the woman’s ministry in a sort of funereal show-and-tell! The ladies were absolutely beside themselves with grief, hoping against hope that Peter could at least provide some comfort for them.

IV. Surprise — But then, as the apostle begins to act, what he does may seem quite familiar. That’s because Peter almost precisely copies what Jesus did when he raised the daughter of Jairus in Mark 5 and Luke 8.

The procedure described here says a lot about Peter at this time in his life and spiritual pilgrimage. In his earlier days, he had been boastful, willful, and impulsive. Peter had loved to take charge and order people around—to the point of even telling Jesus what he should and should not do (**Mk. 8:30-33**). But now—after the Holy Spirit had influenced his mind and heart—Peter was transformed. And because of that transformation, we find him carefully following Jesus’ methods in almost every detail. First, he removed all the mourners from the room. Then he spoke the same words Jesus had spoken, while also holding the dead woman’s hand in his own. But there is one important difference: unlike Jesus, Peter kneels and prays to God.

That one act underscores the contrast between the work of Christ and that of his disciples. In a word, it is one of *authority*. That is, Jesus acts according to his own unique identity as the eternal Word (second Person of the Trinity) in human form with a sinless and unhindered relationship with God the Father. The difference with Peter is that his apostolic authority does not come from himself; it is not his own, but is derived and flows from his relationship with Christ. Thus, Peter humbly bows at Dorcas’s bedside and yields himself in prayer to the power and authority of the Savior.

While I don't want to dwell on this, we do need to recognize the lesson that emerges here. Any authority, power, or privilege you and I may have is *not our own*. We are only stewards of what God allows us to have. Such things are not rights, but privileges. As **James 1:17** puts it: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

This means that, as Christians, there is no room for presumption, arrogance, or power plays in the way we conduct ourselves both within and outside of the church. God's will and ways must oversee and influence everything.

Of course, in this instance, Peter's prayer was answered, and the beloved Dorcas returned to life. Was Peter at all surprised when this happened? We do not know. Perhaps God had given him a special assurance that the woman would instantly be up and at it again. But keep in mind that miracles, by definition and biblical occurrence, are *exceptional events*. And while our theology includes the possibility of the miraculous, we can never demand or treat them as normal.

Perhaps the one who was the most surprised by the miracle was Dorcas herself. To be suddenly snatched from the "other side" and returned to our earthly realm—with its many limitations—must have been a shock and even a disappointment to her. But this is a prime example of how God, in his sovereignty, operates. You can never be sure of the surprises that are waiting for us just around the next corner. What we can know for sure is that, in the end, everything will work out for our benefit (**Rom. 8:28**).

V. Salvation — The immediate result of the miracle can be summed-up in one word: *salvation*. **Verse 42** tells us that many folks believed—not just the miracle itself, but in the Lord behind the miracle. And that is how it always should be. Whatever good is accomplished in and through us, it is Christ who should be glorified since we are only his channels of blessing.

What became of Dorcas? Nothing more is said of her, which leads us to assume that, for the remainder of her life, she was back to business as usual. The woman simply resumed her ministries to needy widows: helping them financially and making clothes in various styles, shapes,

and sizes. From the scriptural silence about Dorcas, there are at least two conclusions we can draw.

First, she did not become a religious celebrity who made public appearances or wrote books for the purpose of self-promotion, outreach, or fundraising. Thankfully, the blending of Christianity with showbiz did not take place until much, much much later.

Second, this scriptural silence may indicate that, even during her post-miracle years, Dorcas's ministries were not all that unusual. In other words, there were probably many like her who constantly and selflessly cared for the needy. Today, we tend to glorify certain activities, gifts, and ministers over others; but that is totally wrong! In reality, ministries are valid only *if* they function faithfully and according to the standards and leading of the Lord. And for the church to properly function, we need many more Dorcases than people with unusual or spectacular gifts. But, of course, such an emphasis is at odds with much of American Christianity today. For example, when was the last time you heard someone say that he or she really desires the gift of helps?

But Scripture strongly affirms such a desire. Consider, for example, the words of **James 1:27**:

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Paul echoes this in his farewell to the Ephesians:

"In everything, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus Himself: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (**Acts 20:35**).

And so, if you really want to please God and be blessed by him, don't focus on the exciting and spectacular or covet the spotlight. Simply turn your natural interests and talents over to God. Allow him to use you fully, and keep your eyes wide open for people to help. In this regard, George Morrison writes:

"Probably Dorcas had been a fine seamstress as a girl; but in her girlish days it would be fancy work. The fancy work never became real work till the pity of Jesus touched her womanly heart. She was not a

speaker; she never addressed meetings. I dare say she envied ladies who could speak. But she learned that there was a service quite as good as that, and that was the service of the consecrated needle.”

As I said at the beginning, Dorcas illustrates and embodies the spirit of Christian motherhood. She was selfless, caring, and actively looked out for the needs of others—in the home, in the church, and out in society. The influence of secular society has greatly reduced the ranks of people like Dorcas. But that can change as we allow Christ to have his way with us. Through Scripture and the Holy Spirit, he can implant in us the motivation to get our eyes off of ourselves, and use our resources to build up people and the cause of Christ. When that happens, our humble efforts become an extension of the Lord’s kingdom itself. As F.W. Boredom once declared: “A stitch in time is said to save nine; but Dorcas got her needle into the very fabric of heaven.”

Harold Ockenga put it this way: “How wonderful it is for a godly woman to be the mother of a few, but if she cannot be a mother to one (or even if she is), let her be a mother to many, as was Dorcas.”