

The Gazelle, A Beautiful Woman of God

This year, the Great Canadian Bible Study will explore the life, the death and the resurrection of a woman named Tabitha (Hebrew), or Dorcas (Greek), both of which mean Gazelle. The gazelle evokes the image of grace and beauty. We actually know very little about this woman and we certainly do not know what she looked like, but there is no doubt that she was a beautiful, beautiful woman of God and not because of any physical features she may have had. In reflecting together on her story, it will be noteworthy that though an amazing miracle occurred in her life, unlike Lazarus who is remembered for being brought back to life by Christ, Dorcas seems to be remembered more for her acts of charity. We will consider together why this might be so through the study.

Our story takes place in the sea port of Joppa (which interestingly also means beautiful), 35 miles northwest of Jerusalem and 10 miles from the town of Lydda, where Peter will be found and called upon. There appears to have been a group of believers located in Joppa that must have organized very soon after Christ's resurrection or perhaps were even active followers when Jesus was still living. We do not know the beginnings of this particular church but gather from the text that it was active and faithful and that they were connected to the greater body of believers as they were aware of Peter's activities.

In Preparation, read Psalm 20: 1 - 5

Begin this study by reading Psalm 20: 1 – 5 as a blessing to one another. Reflect in a minute or two of silence and then read the psalm once more. Consider what might be the desire of your heart for this time of study together and lift that desire to your Heavenly Father. Read the verses of Psalm 20 one last time as you open your heart to receive what God has to give to you.

1. As mentioned, the meaning of the name of Tabitha or Dorcas in either language is Gazelle. Reflect upon your own name. Share the story with each other of how you received your name and what meaning it holds for you.
2. Without referring to the text, if you had heard the story of Dorcas previously, what are some things that come to mind when you hear her name?

Now Read Acts 9: 32 - 43

3. We include in our study a story about Peter who was travelling around the area of Jerusalem. He visited a group of believers in Lydda and performed a healing for a man who had been paralyzed for eight years. What is the significance of this miracle by Peter in light of the development of the new church?

4. Peter is adamant as to who performed the healing. Where does our power come from in any good that we might do? Read John 14: 11 – 14. Discuss what these verses mean for the birth of the early church and then the church today. Are we able to do greater things and if not, what are we lacking in our Christian experience?
5. Read verse 35. What was the response to this miracle? Would we see more response to the Gospel of Jesus if we saw more miracles among us, or is the world too skeptical for that kind of evidence? What do you think is our best witness today?
6. Tabitha is referred to as a “disciple” or learner. A disciple was more than one who simply learned from the master, but one who would also strive to imitate the teacher. It is significant that this is the only time in the New Testament that the feminine form of the word, “Mathetria” for disciple is used. Evidently she was so committed to Christ that this description fit her better than "follower" or "servant." How do you see Dorcas as an imitator of Jesus? What does this tell us about the ministry that women had and can have within the church?
7. By the actions described in verses 37 and 38, how important was Tabitha to that community of believers and what evidence verifies your thoughts? Consider the following points:
 - a. Was it only the women that seemed to feel the loss of Tabitha?
 - b. How important would a matter be considered that they would disturb a leader such as Peter to come to them? Who is mobilized to go and get Peter? What did they expect of Peter? Did they expect Peter to heal her, or were they calling upon him for comfort?
 - c. What does it tell us about Peter that he would come?
8. Verse 39 defines more clearly the “doing good and helping the poor” mentioned in verse 36. What was the ministry of Dorcas that was so valued by the community? What challenges might Dorcas’ have faced as she cared for the poor? Compare resources we have now with those available to her.

In first-century Palestine women without men were first on the list of completely vulnerable populations. A widow during the first century would have absolutely no access to economic structures; no independence; no one to advocate for her; absolutely no way to live. This was a very serious societal problem at the time Luke was writing and in other parts of the book of Acts you’ll see that the plight of widows was a topic of hot debate within the first church.
9. Look up Acts 6: 1 – 7. How important was this ministry to the life of the early church?
 - a. Who was assigned to look after the widows in this chapter and what qualifications were necessary for those appointed to this ministry?
 - b. What might that tell us about Dorcas?

10. Read Mark 5: 35 – 43. There is a phrase in this passage that is very similar to that found in Acts 9: 40. “Talitha Kumi” is very similar to “Tabitha Kumi”, which is the Hebrew translation of “get up”. Jesus said, “Little girl, get up.” Peter said, “Tabitha, get up”, using her Hebrew name. Peter was present with Jesus in the Marcan account. As far as we know, Peter had never raised a person back to life. What gave Peter the courage to try this miracle and is there any significance to him choosing to use the same phrasing?

Author’s thoughts: Commentaries that I consulted agree that these stories were included by Luke in the book of the Acts of the Apostles to show how the power of the resurrected Christ was at work among the apostles. Miracles were evidence that God’s work begun in Jesus would be carried on through his believers. But what is most fascinating to me about the story of Dorcas is that her name is not so much remembered because she was brought back from death. Instead, she is remembered as a woman who radically addressed the suffering of the most vulnerable and destitute population of her community. In response to the need around her, you could say she started a faith-based initiative.

Her name is synonymous with radical acts of justice and mercy on behalf of the poorest and most discarded members of society. Today, many missions in North America are called Dorcas Houses for that very reason. And while one verse is dedicated to recounting her miraculous healing, the other verses tell, in myriad of ways, the grief of a community who heard her name and immediately thought of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, lived out in tangible ways. Whether as Dorcas or Tabitha, the name of this devoted disciple of Jesus Christ meant then and means now a radical, extreme living out of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that has the power to transform lives and communities.

And, she is remembered because she is a woman. For certain, I believe that is why women are particularly drawn to the story of Tabitha or Dorcas. She brings dignity and importance to the many ministries that we often carry out behind the scenes, ministries of compassion and service that seem insignificant to the more upfront ministries of the church, and yet in truth constitute the backbone of the church of Christ. Her miraculous healing validates our contribution to the work of Christ.

I Corinthians 1:26-31

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became

for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

11. By what name are you known? In other words, when your name is spoken in the community of faith, what do you pray comes to mind? And when people encounter you outside this place, get to know you . . . to know your name, what might your name signify to them? And when you die—when all the living here on earth is done with, what will your name call to mind? If you are willing, share what is the passion of your heart for which you would like to be remembered. Or if preferred, take this as a time of private prayer and reflection before the One who calls you.

By doing this Bible study together and contributing a Toonie or more, you are helping to support the poor and destitute young girls of India and providing a second chance for them through training and education. Thank you for your generous support of the Eva Rose York Bible and Technical Training School for Young Women by your participation in the Great Canadian Bible Study.

Grace and peace,

Faye Reynolds
Director of Women's Ministries
Women in Focus/Canadian Baptists of Western Canada