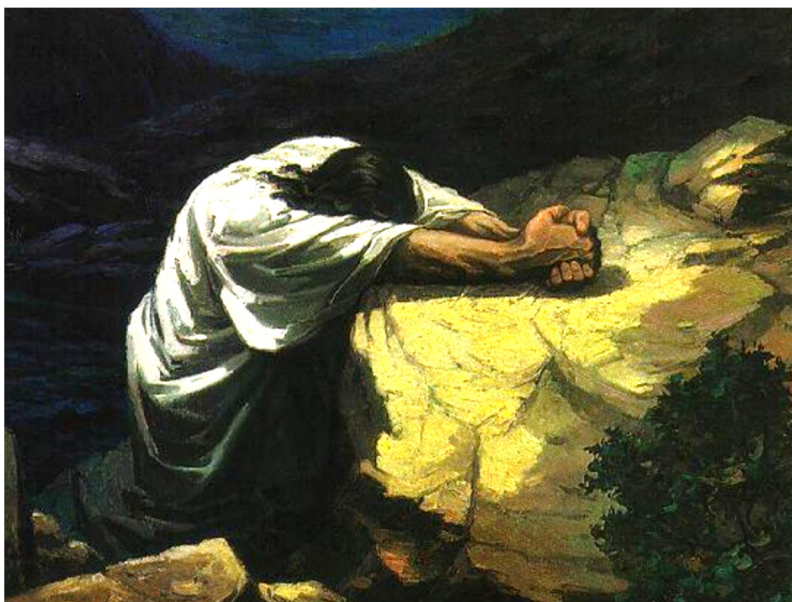


Sermon on Acts 9:36-43 by Rev. John Cheek



"Jesus Gethsemane"

Introduction

The setting for this text is the important port city of Joppa. This city has been absorbed by Tel Aviv now. The primary character in this text is a woman named Tabitha in Aramaic or Dorcas in Greek. In either of these languages her name means "gazelle."

Because Greek was the primary language of trade at the time of this event, Greek was spoken by almost everyone, even if they were also fluent in Aramaic, a successor language to Hebrew. In honor of this woman, Dorcas societies became very common starting in the 1800's. These were societies dedicated to providing clothing to the poor. In his book *Roughing It*, Mark Twain makes reference to Dorcas Societies in the American west.

The story will involve a group of widows who, as a group, were among the most isolated and vulnerable in the society of the time.

Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for the blessing of your word.
We thank you that we may approach it, and
we pray that your Holy Spirit will be here,
moving among us and moving within us and
teaching us what you have for us today.
In the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen

Scripture: Acts 9:36-43 (NIV)

³⁶ In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. ³⁷ About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. ³⁸ Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"

³⁹ Peter went with them, and when he arrived, he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

⁴⁰ Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes and seeing Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. ⁴² This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. ⁴³ Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

The Text

- A. (v. 36-38) In Joppa there was a disciple [*a follower of Jesus as Messiah. This is the only place in the Greek New Testament where this feminine word is used, although the masculine form is used over 250 times*] named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor.
1. (v. 37) About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.
 2. (v. 38) Lydda was near Joppa [*the distance was probably about 10 or 12 miles*]; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"
- B. (v. 39a) Peter went with them and
1. (v. 39b) When he arrived, he was taken upstairs to the room.
 2. (v. 39c) All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. [*It is good to consider the fact that, under the laws of Judaism, contact of any kind with a dead body resulted in becoming ritually unclean, requiring specific purification rites to be restored to community and cleanliness. The love of these widows for Dorcas is such that they are willing to risk uncleanness.*]

- C. (v. 40 & 41) Peter sent them all out of the room.
1. (v. 40b) Then he got down on his knees and prayed.
 2. (v. 40c) Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up."
 3. (v. 40d) She opened her eyes and seeing Peter she sat up.
 4. (v. 41a) He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet.
 5. (v. 41b) Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive.
- D. (v. 42 & 43) This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

What can we take away from this passage?

There are several truths that we can embrace from this story. The first idea I want to look at has to do with Tabitha's character. Although some religious traditions have assumed that she herself is a widow, nothing in this Scripture passage says so. What is clear is that charity toward the poor and marginalized widows of the time was a central value of her life. A key aspect of her devotion to following Jesus is generosity and compassion.

When we follow Jesus as Savior and Lord, we experience a transformation in our very being. I believe that one aspect of this transformation is the capacity to see and to understand the suffering of others, and the deep desire to alleviate this suffering. People act on this capacity and desire in a number of ways. Some prepare food for the poor and the homeless. Others volunteer as tutors at schools. Some write letters to those who are in prisons. Others take on a ministry of regular and intentional prayer for those who are in need.

I think I need to offer one word that can be a corrective, especially for those like me who were reared in a tradition of fear-based obedience to God. We don't carry out these ministries of compassion and care in hopes that it will cause God to love us. That understanding is completely and tragically wrong. My friends, God has already loved us. God has already loved you. God loves you and me with an extravagance that we can only catch glimpses of. We carry out ministries of love and compassion because God has loved us, not in hopes that maybe God will decide to love us. This is a message I think you'll hear frequently during my time with you.

A second area we can think about is to look at Peter's action when he is asked for help. Peter is one of the strongest personalities we find in the New Testament. He's almost always the one to open his mouth first, to speak loudest and longest, and to jump before he looks. But in this story, what does Peter do? He shows up. We don't know what God revealed to Peter at any point in the story. We don't know what he expected he was going to do. But, when the two men from Joppa came to him asking for help, he showed up. Our capacity to show up and to remain in relationship is a gift from God, and God is glorified when we do.

He also began his ministry in the right way. He prayed. You may be different, but my story is often one in which I try to do things by myself, fail, try harder, fail again, start over, get it partly right, and so on. Too often, I remember way late in the process that I should have prayed first. The more we discipline ourselves to begin, continue, and end with prayer, the more faithful we will be and the less anxious we will be.

The third point I think we should consider is what happened as a result of the widows sending the messengers and Peter showing up and starting with prayer. This event became known and many people believed in the Lord. The end result of this story is that God was glorified. We don't get any hint that Peter was going around Joppa saying, "Yep, I'm the one. I'm the one who raised that woman from the dead. Come take a look at a real-life miracle worker." Rather, Peter remains in Joppa to do the work to which God has called him. When we undertake our ministries, whatever those ministries are, with humility and an understanding that everything we do is about God and not about us, God will be glorified, and that's the entire reason we're here.

My dear brothers and sisters, may we seek to be compassionate and generous with the resources God has given us. May we be ready to show up and to stay at the table. May all we do be bathed in the beauty of prayer. And may God Almighty be glorified in everything we do and in every word we say. May it be so.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Jesus Gethsemane" (*artist unknown*)

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