

February 18 Lesson 12

Faithful Disciples

Devotional Reading: [1 Peter 1:3-9; 4:7-11](#)

Background Scripture: [Acts 9:36-43](#)

ACTS 9:36-43



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.

KEY VERSE

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.—[Acts 9:40](#)

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Introduction

A. Call the Expert

Many court cases rely on the testimony of expert witnesses. Because of their education, training, skill, and/or experience, these individuals provide specialized knowledge in a particular subject area. For example, a forensic psychologist may be called to discuss a murder suspect’s mental state, a handwriting expert may testify in a forgery case, or a medical expert may offer testimony in a malpractice case.

Such experts are sometimes referred to as “hired guns” or “go-to guys.” These monikers are descriptive of their roles: they are the people to whom one turns in times of legal trouble. Peter

was a go-to guy of a different sort in the first-century church—an expert who could address an issue of life and death.

B. Lesson Background

Today’s lesson takes place in the first decade of the church, sometime in the AD 30s. The death of Stephen ([Acts 7](#)) caused a scattering of Jerusalem church members ([8:1](#)). One of them, Philip, traveled to Samaria where he had success in preaching the gospel ([8:5-8](#), [12](#)). The 12 apostles were still in Jerusalem, and of those Peter and John made the trip to Samaria to assist Philip and confirm his work ([8:14](#)). There Peter had a dramatic encounter with a sorcerer named Simon, a man who attempted to buy the power of the Holy Spirit ([8:18, 19](#)). After rebuking Simon, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching in villages along the way ([8:25](#)).

Sometime after this, Peter went to Lydda, a village about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem, to visit believers ([Acts 9:32](#)). There he healed a paralytic named Aeneas, causing many in the village and others nearby to turn to the Lord ([9:33-35](#)).

In today’s lesson, Peter ended up in the seaside city of Joppa (modern Jaffa), 12 miles to the northwest of Lydda. Joppa was a walled seaport city built on a small ridge that jutted into the Mediterranean Sea. Its tiny harbor was the closest natural anchorage to Jerusalem, causing the city to become a bustling port by the time of Solomon (see [2 Chronicles 2:16](#)). Allotted to the tribe of Dan ([Joshua 19:40, 46](#)), Joppa was the seaport to which Jonah fled to hire passage to a distant place in his attempt to escape God’s call to preach to Nineveh ([Jonah 1:3](#)). Joppa was a Jewish city, and it had an established church of Christians of Jewish background. This thriving seaport is the setting for today’s lesson.

I. Asking the Impossible

([Acts 9:36-38](#))

A. Terrible Loss ([vv. 36, 37](#))

^{36a}. In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas);

The term *disciple* is common in the New Testament as a designation for a follower of Jesus, occurring dozens of times (examples: [Acts 9:10](#); [16:1](#); [21:16](#)). But here is the only time the word is used with a feminine form, much like we distinguish “actress” from “actor.”

The names by which this *disciple* is known are noted at the outset of the account. *Tabitha* is the Hebrew or Aramaic version of her name; in Greek it is *Dorcas*. Both refer to the small, graceful antelope known as the gazelle.

The two names are used interchangeably in the account (see [Acts 9:39, 40](#)), indicating she is known to answer to both (this lesson will use the name Dorcas). Whether either indicates her given name or is the moniker accorded to her because of her graceful life, we are not told.

^{36b}. she was always doing good and helping the poor.

Dorcas has standing within the Joppa church because of her acts of compassion. Her reputation may even be established among unbelievers. She both does good deeds and provides relief for *the poor* in various ways. This may indicate she is a woman of some means, although we are not told the source of her income.

Her active life gives the impression of someone who is younger rather than older. Since she has a special concern for the widows of her community ([Acts 9:39](#), below), some think that she is a widow herself. That idea tends to work against the theory above that she is a woman of some means, since widows are generally poor. Both ideas are speculative in any case. What is not in doubt is that she is a fixture in Joppa, an example for the entire community. Both Christians and Jews admire such a person.

^{37a}. About that time she became sick and died,

The tragic death of Dorcas begins with little detail or emotion. (The emotion comes later.) Her death from an illness seems to have been a quick process, not that of a lingering condition. There are no hospitals, so Dorcas would have been cared for by her friends. Her death most likely occurred in her own home.

^{37b}. and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room.

After Dorcas dies, her female friends do the normal things in preparation for burial. Probably still in her own home, her body is washed and laid out in an upstairs room. If this indicates a delay in burial, it may be because her sudden death has not allowed time to prepare a tomb. On the other hand, it may be that her friends hesitate to put the body in a grave if they anticipate she might live again. Do we see evidence of audacious faith?

The *upstairs room* image occurs elsewhere in Acts as locations for the church to meet (see [Acts 20:8](#); compare [Luke 22:12](#); [Acts 1:13](#)). The readers may be intended to understand that this is the meeting place for the Joppa congregation and that Dorcas hosted this church in her home. If this bit of speculation is true, then her passing becomes even more devastating for these disciples, for their house of worship has become a place of death.



Visual for Lesson 12., “Under what circumstances would you expect a church leader to be a ‘first responder’? Why?”

B. Desperate Request ([v. 38](#))

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!”

The news of Peter’s presence in Lydda, 12 miles away, catches the attention of the congregation in Joppa (see the Lesson Background). With a 24-mile round trip ahead of them and time being of the essence, we assume that the *two men* dispatched to Lydda are those most physically able to get there and back in the quickest time possible.

Best speed is probably a walking rate of three miles per hour with rest stops minimized. That means four hours to Lydda and four hours back to Joppa. This can be done in one period of daylight.

But wait—why the hurry? Dorcas is already dead! One factor for the haste is likely that of decomposition. Because a decaying corpse soon begins to smell, interment of the body follows quickly in this time and place. Embalming is not practiced by the Jews of the first century (contrast [Genesis 50:1-3, 26](#)). Another factor for the haste, less likely but still possible, may be

the ancient Jewish belief that the souls of the dead hover near their bodies for three days, after which time the souls depart.

Do the Christians in Joppa want Peter to come quickly to perform a resurrection before a certain amount of time passes? Do they want him to come quickly so he can console the grieving before a burial must take place? Neither is stated. The only thing that seems beyond doubt is that time is of the essence for whatever Peter is expected to do.

II. Witnessing the Incredible

([Acts 9:39-43](#))

A. Loss Mourned ([v. 39](#))

^{39a.} Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room.

The men from Joppa are persuasive! The timing of all we see in this verse is unstated, but a reasonable conjecture is possible. If Dorcas died during the night, her friends would have prepared her body the next morning. Concurrently, the messengers would have gone to Lydda and returned with Peter the same day. Thus it is entirely possible that Peter arrives and is ushered *upstairs* within 24 hours of the death.

^{39b.} 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.

In the upper chamber, Peter finds a vigil being kept by the widows of the church. The designation *all the widows* means there are at least three, since two would be designated by the word *both* (example: [Luke 1:6](#)). This is an emotionally charged scene. No spoken words are recorded from the widows. Perhaps their profound grief renders them unable to talk. They are *crying* without embarrassment in front of this guest. If this has been going on for eight hours or more (see comments on [Acts 9:38](#)), they must be exhausted!

With no explanatory words recorded, the grief-stricken women show Peter the clothes made for them by Dorcas. Have they brought these in a preplanned manner specifically to show to Peter? Or are they merely wearing them as part of their necessary attire? Either way, the items of clothing are visual evidence of Dorcas's good deeds ([Acts 9:36b](#), above). Most widows of the time are in a precarious financial position as evidenced by their numerous mentions in the Bible in contexts of vulnerability and need (examples: [Acts 6:1](#); [James 1:27](#)).

Some students dig into the Greek underneath the translations *robes* and *other clothing* to figure out exactly what kinds of clothing Dorcas made for the widows. This is probably a dead-end street due to the general nature of the words. Wherever we see these two words together, however, they seem to speak to the entirety of one's clothing, or nearly so (compare [Matthew 5:40](#); [Luke 6:29](#); and [John 19:23](#)). Dorcas seems to have been a versatile seamstress! But the widows do not weep for loss of a clothing supplier. They are moved by the death of one who loved them in word and deed.

B. Loss Reversed ([vv. 40, 41](#))

^{40a.} Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed.

Peter seems to spend little if any time comforting the widows. Instead, he seems to use Jesus' procedure in the raising of Jairus's daughter in [Mark 5:35-43](#) as something of a model. Jesus established an atmosphere of semiprivacy and relative quiet ([5:37, 40](#)); Peter establishes complete privacy (*sent them all out*), and the concurrent reduction in noise level will help him focus. He knows he must pray as hard as he has ever prayed, for he has no personal power or healing skills that will help Dorcas (compare [Acts 3:12](#)).

After the room is cleared, Peter assumes a posture suitable for fervent prayer: on his knees (the other passages that mention kneeling with praying in the same verse are [1 Kings 8:54](#); [Daniel 6:10](#); [Luke 22:41](#); [Acts 20:36](#); [21:5](#)).

^{40b.} Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up."

After praying to God, it is time to talk directly to Dorcas, also known as Tabitha ([Acts 9:36](#), above). Peter's imperative *Tabitha, get up* may be compared with Jesus' "Talitha cumi" and the accompanying interpretation "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" regarding Jairus's daughter ([Mark 5:41](#)). Is it just a coincidence that there is only one letter difference between the words *Tabitha* and *Talitha* in either English or the underlying Greek transliterations? Is it just a coincidence that the second words spoken by Jesus and Peter mean the same thing? Peter is not uttering a magic incantation. But he may indeed be following Jesus' pattern.

^{40c, 41.} **She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. 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.**

The resurrections of Jairus's daughter and Dorcas both involve taking the person by the hand and immediate physical movement on the part of the resurrected (compare [Mark 5:41, 42](#); [Luke 8:54, 55](#)). Peter assists Dorcas in standing up. For a moment, it is just the two of them in the room. We easily imagine them both speechless at what has just happened. Peter recovers quickly and presents her alive to those waiting. Dorcas lives! The tears of the widows probably continue, but now they are tears of joy.

C. New Births Result ([vv. 42, 43](#))

^{42.} This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.

There is a great bonus here for the church: many new believers *in the Lord*. God uses signs and wonders in the book of Acts to bring people to faith—the faith that leads to eternal life (see [Acts 2:43](#); [8:6](#); [14:3](#); [15:12](#)). Without this intended result, there wouldn't be any lasting point in performing resurrections.

There is also a great contrast here between the character of Peter and someone like Simon the sorcerer from Samaria. Simon's desire to have the power to bestow the Holy Spirit came from

selfish motives ([Acts 8:18, 19](#)). Peter claims no honor for himself. He is Christ's servant, willing to go where he is called and giving all the glory to God. On an earlier occasion he specifically disavowed having healing power of his own ([3:12-16](#)); Paul and Barnabas will do likewise later ([14:11-18](#)). Bad things happen when people seek glory that is not theirs to have ([12:21-23](#); [13:11](#)).

⁴³ Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

We easily imagine Peter receiving many offers for lodging, given what has just happened! He chooses to stay with someone who has a Jewish name but not a Jewish occupation. Tanners are frowned upon by Jews who are scrupulous in obeying the Law of Moses. The reason is that tanners deal in dead animal parts (skins) that are ceremonially unclean ([Leviticus 11](#)).

For Peter to accept an offer to stay at the house of one of the grateful widows would create a morally dubious appearance in addition to being financially burdensome to the one hosting him. Simon is likely a prosperous person given that he is able to accommodate Peter *in Joppa for some time*. Peter's lengthy association with an "unclean" Jew undoubtedly raises eyebrows, but no outright criticism is recorded (contrast [Acts 11:1-3](#)).

Conclusion

A. Living Legacies

Here's a one-question test: What legacy of Dorcas remained after she died? If you answered "clothing she made for widows," we invite you to try again! Dorcas's legacy was more than clothing. When she died, her legacy was grateful people who had been objects of her kindness and for whom she had modeled the love of Christ.

Each widow was a living legacy. She had taught them by her life how to care for others less fortunate than themselves. She had given them an example to cherish. Peter brought Dorcas back from death, but eventually she died again. When that happened, her legacy was no doubt similar if not enhanced.

What sort of legacy will you leave? Perhaps you are thinking mainly in terms of money you have designated in your will for a Christian cause or organization. Before trying to build your entire legacy that way, consider two points: (1) that's not what Dorcas did, and (2) "The man who leaves money to charity in his will is only giving away what no longer belongs to him." The quote is from Voltaire; although he was certainly no friend of Christianity, there is some wisdom in his observation.

Our primary legacies will be the people we are influencing now for Christ, people who will remain to do the work of God's kingdom after we are dead and gone. How will people remember you? Are you a workaholic who never has time for others, or are you someone who can always be counted on to stop and help? Will your memory be of one who loved money the most or who loved people the most? Are you a self-giving parent, or do you model "me first" to your children? Most importantly, will you leave behind a legacy of faith?

B. Legacy of Evil

Domitian became Emperor of Rome in AD 81. His tendency was to grab more and more power for himself. His pretentious ways were seen clearly when he required visitors to his royal court to address him as “My Lord and God Domitian.” Eventually, the Roman Senate could stand no more, and Domitian was assassinated. In a remarkable move, the Senate then voted a *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of memory) against Domitian. His legacy became that of a hated tyrant.

May we leave legacies like Dorcas rather than Domitian!

C. Prayer

Father, forgive us for not attending to the work of your kingdom as you desire. Remind us that the legacy we leave will be that of people we have served in the name of Christ. Indeed, it is in his name we pray and no other. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Let us build our living legacies as we
answer the calls of those in crisis.

HOW TO SAY IT

Aeneas *Ee-nee-us*.

Domitian *Duh-mish-un*.

Jairus *Jye-rus* or *Jay-ih-rus*.

Joppa *Jop-uh*.

Lydda *Lid-uh*.

Nineveh *Nin-uh-vuh*.

Samaria *Suh-mare-ee-uh*.

Tabitha *Tab-ih-thuh*.

Talitha cumi (Aramaic) *Tuh-lee-thuh koo-me*.

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