

## “Modeling Gowns Made by the Gazelle”

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Text: Acts: 9:36-43

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Emily, Emma, Madison, Abigail, Olivia, Isabella, Hannah, Samantha, Ava, and Ashley. Those are the top ten of the most popular names for baby girls in the last few years. Her name didn't make the top ten, believe it or not, her name didn't make the top 100. “Destiny” was number 32, “Diana” was number 99, but “Dorcas” was nowhere to be found on the list. I've only known one person named Dorcas in my life, and I'm not here to criticize the name, because “Neil” didn't make the list of the 100 most popular boys' names. Dorcas isn't a favorite choice, nor is Tabitha.

Our passage from the ninth chapter of Acts is the only mention we have of Dorcas – Tabitha was her Aramaic name and Dorcas the Greek translation. In Greek, Dorcas means “Gazelle” and there is an animal called the Dorcas gazelle. There is an organization called the Dorcas Aid International, and in Rhode Island there is the Dorcas Place Adult and Family Learning Center. There are Dorcas Sewing Societies, and in 1884, a steel lined thimble was patented. It was called “The Dorcas Thimble.”

Who is this lady and why does Luke find it important to include her in his account of the early church? Why is Dorcas the only woman in scripture to be called a disciple?

In first century Rome, women without men topped the list of vulnerable populations. A widow had little access to economic structures. The recurring Biblical theme of charitable concerns for widows reveals their inferior status and poor treatment in the community. An argument in the faith community over the care of widows raised such concern that the office of deacon was created in large part to resolve it. Yet despite the care shown for them, the widows were imagined by the church folk to be dependent and powerless. The widows of Joppa had only Dorcas – Tabitha – and her faith-based initiative.

She lived 34 miles northwest of Jerusalem at the port of Joppa, an important Christian center during the years when the new faith was spreading from Jerusalem across the Mediterranean. She was apparently a woman of some means. And although the Bible doesn't give us exact details, we can be sure that Dorcas, with her nimble fingers, stitched layettes for babies, made cloaks, robes, sandals, and other apparel for poverty-stricken widows, the sick, and the aged.

Doubtless the people she helped wondered what would happen to them if she died. One day, as the people feared, Dorcas, amid her labors, was seized with illness. Death came suddenly, leaving a gaping hole in the heart of the community. Saints in the church and widows she had befriended made their way to her house, washed her, and laid her in the room upstairs – probably her sewing room. Some of the local disciples heard that Peter was nearby and sent two men to bring him to them. Maybe Peter could help this wonderful and compassionate woman who had spent her life doing good works and acts of charity. After all, Peter had just healed a paralyzed man ten miles away in Lydda – maybe the news had spread about that miracle and they thought he could do the same for Dorcas.

When Peter stepped into the upstairs room, he was greeted by the sound of weeping women. These widow women were at a loss over the tragic death of their friend Tabitha. She had been more than a friend because she had also clothed them with her own handmade garments. They stood around her bed, grieving and weeping, while modeling their “gowns by gazelle” for Peter.

When I was living in McPherson, I was asked to officiate at the funeral of Marvin, a parishioner who was a woodworker. When I met with the family to plan the service, I remarked that one of the first gifts we had received upon arriving in McPherson was a magazine rack made by Marvin. Marvin later made us a display box so that Ben could show his rocks and fossils as a 4-H project. While I was with the family that afternoon, his wife took me around and showed me lots of items he had created and built, and even took me to his workshop/garage. Sometimes when someone dies, we find ourselves drawn to those things associated with that person – it not only helps us celebrate and be proud of that which our loved one accomplished, but it's also a way of acknowledging their ongoing presence.

A woman who's lost her husband finds meaning and comfort in wearing one of his old shirts. A widower can't bear to part with a bottle of perfume because that was her fragrance and on occasion, opens the perfume to once again experience that smell. The child whose parent was a painter or seamstress or woodworker is drawn to those tangible things to celebrate and affirm an intangible presence.

That, I believe, was what was going on in that upstairs room in Joppa. These women were so touched by the life of Dorcas that at the death of Dorcas they were moved to show off her labors of love – those gowns she had created for them.

Peter sent them out of the room and then knelt at her bedside. Do you suppose as he began to pray – he remembered Tabitha welcoming the disciples to her home and feeding them? Maybe he saw in his mind the image of a child, dressed in a gown Tabitha had made, glowing with pride as she entered the waters of baptism. Maybe Peter thought of a poor man, rags discarded, who had new clothing to wear and new dignity to display. Maybe he envisioned provisions slipped into the bundles of the widows who were too proud to beg, but whom everyone knew, had too little to live on. Only Tabitha noticed enough to care.

So Peter prayed and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Her eyes opened, she saw Peter, and she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her out of her coffin – bed. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. So what are we to make of this story? A dead woman, surrounded by weeping widows modeling her clothes, raised from the dead by a traveling apostle?

I cannot read this story without asking myself the question: “Does my life count for something? Am I making an impact with my life so that at my death, someone will notice?” In other words, will my death really make a difference because my life made a difference? In Dorcas, we have an example of a Christian disciple whose life has been devoted to the service of others and whose death leaves an enormous gap.

So I think it’s fair for us to do a bit of self-reflection, and evaluate what we’re doing with our lives and our time and our money. Are we helping others? Are we making a difference where we can? Would our absence matter? In Dorcas we have an example of someone whose life shows forth the power of the Easter faith. We may not envy Dorcas her name, but her witness of faith is one worth imitating.

The other thing we can say about this text is that it reveals that in Jesus Christ our worlds are turned upside down and inside out. What is old can be made new, what is dead can be alive, and what is lost can be found. In the Kingdom of God, nothing or no one is ever closed, fixed, settled, or dead. Even you and I are raised to new life – we can be and are new creatures in Christ. The powerful love of God in Jesus Christ will not leave our lives or our worlds unchanged. You see, just as Peter continued the healing power of Jesus, the church of Jesus Christ is called to continue that ministry of healing – of bringing light and hope to people whose lives are full of darkness and despair.

And, did you notice that in the case of Dorcas and in the healing of the paralyzed man which happened immediately before, Peter does not preach a sermon? No sermon is given, yet in both cases dramatically powerful witness results. That is a good reminder to preachers as well as parishioners that outsiders can discern God’s presence through acts of mercy as well as through acts of speech, perhaps even more so.

Let us pray: O God, how easy to believe that we are instruments of your love when our lives are going well. How difficult to believe this when our lives seem to be going nowhere or filled with concerns and activities that wear us out. Lord, we know we do not need to always feel satisfied with what we’re attempting to be and to do in order to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Lord, we are your messengers, ready to tell of your enormous kindness and your amazing grace. Help us believe that those with whom we live and work will see your love shining through all we are and all we do. Amen.

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