

November 24, 2024 (Lesson 13)

FAITHFUL SERVANTS: DORCAS, LYDIA, AND PHOEBE

1. **Dorcas: Faithful and Healed** (Acts 9:36-43)
2. **Lydia: Gracious Host** (Acts 16:9-15, 40)
3. **Phoebe: Generous Servant-Leader** (Romans 16:1-2)

Central Truth: Godly women are integral to the health and ministry of the church.

Focus: Affirm the effective ministry of godly women in the church and honor their contribution to the kingdom of God.

Evangelism Emphasis: The intercession of godly women is effective in winning the lost.

Golden Text: “A woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised” (Proverbs 31:30).

Surveys indicate 60 percent of church attenders are women. A Pew Research found Christian women to be more devout than their male counterparts. This isn't to say all Christian men are less committed and involved than women in the church. But, it does reflect a greater level of ministering by godly women in church ministries.

Countless congregations of all denominations would struggle greatly if it were not for women's groups. In some smaller churches, women's ongoing fund-raising efforts frequently have often made the difference between being financially stable or struggling to survive.

This lesson, based on three examples of godly women, takes us in a different direction than what has been covered in the previous studies. Rather than studying individuals in their roles in the big picture of God's initiating the human race and bringing about redemption, this lesson provides brief views of three godly women who contributed to the ministry of the church within their communities.

Within a total of twenty-five verses, the Scriptures provide a bird's-eye view of the ministry of three godly women in the New Testament. Being included not only honors them, but also provides examples of ministry outside the boxes of preaching and teaching. Their lives point to the importance of godly women impacting the overall health and ministry of local churches. The kingdom of God needs women who are skilled in areas frequently not associated with the abilities of

men. Also, we have the obligation to recognize all the ministries women carry out in the body of Christ.

1. DORCAS: FAITHFUL AND HEALED

A. Full of Good Works (Acts 9:36-38)

³⁶ Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did. ³⁷ And it came to pass in those days, that she was sick, and died: whom when they had washed, they laid her in an upper chamber. ³⁸ And forasmuch as Lydda was nigh to Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent unto him two men, desiring him that he would not delay to come to them.

This first section of our lesson focuses on a godly woman who lived and served in the city of Joppa. Located on the west side of Palestine with access to the Mediterranean Sea, it served as the seaport for Jerusalem. Joppa was about thirty-five miles from Jerusalem and ten miles northwest of Lydda. This ancient walled city stood on a 116-foot-tall rocky ledge.

The seaport provided some difficulties for ships arriving and leaving due to large rocks. When Jonah fled from his assignment to Nineveh, he went to Joppa and secured passage to Tarsus. Today, the city of Jaffa is located at this site.

After indicating the geographic location, verse 36 introduces Dorcas as a “certain disciple.” This description goes far beyond being a distant follower. By definition, it speaks of an individual who, in mind and life, accepts the practices and principles of a specific teacher. In the case of Dorcas, this indicates she adhered to the teachings of Jesus. As was common, she was known by two names—one in Greek and one in Aramaic. *Dorcas* means “gazelle”; *Tabitha* means “doe.”

Her ministry consisted of being a caregiver to the poor and needy. This wasn’t just an occasional activity, but a lifestyle—she “was always doing good” (v. 36 NIV). This ended when she was stricken with an illness which resulted in her death. Friends washed her body and then placed it in an

upper room. It was normal to wrap the body in wide bands of cloth, giving the appearance of a mummy. In death, a person resembled how they were wrapped at birth.

Normally, burial took place within twenty-four hours. In the case of the rebellious Ananias and Sapphira, their bodies were buried immediately after death (5:1-11). If there were some reason to delay burial, it could last up to three days. In these cases, a considerable amount of burial spices would need to be used to cut down the smell of a decaying body in a warm climate.

Hearing of Peter's being in the nearby city of Lydda, they sent messengers requesting him to immediately come to Joppa. The death of Dorcas was a crisis to them in terms of her ministry and her personal impact on the believers. Sending "two men" with an urgent message (9:38) is also seen in 8:14, when Peter and John were sent to Samaria to see the reality of Samaritans accepting the Gospel as preached to them by Philip.

Likely, the believers had heard of the miraculous healing of the paralyzed man in Lydda through the ministry of Peter (9:32-35). After being bedridden for eight years, this man was restored to health as Peter told him, "Get up and roll up your mat" (v. 34 NIV). As a result of Aeneas' healing, individuals in two cities began to believe in the Lord.

—*In your congregation, who are some members "full of good works" (v. 36)?*

B. Resurrected Witness (Acts 9:39-43)

³⁹ Then Peter arose and went with them. When he was come, they brought him into the upper chamber: and all the widows stood by him weeping, and shewing the coats and garments which Dorcas made, while she was with them. ⁴⁰ But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ And he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive. ⁴² And it was known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³ And it came to pass, that he tarried many days in Joppa with one Simon a tanner.

Without delay, Peter went with the messengers to Joppa. Upon arriving, he was taken to the room where they had laid Dorcas' body. There he found the grieving widows who had benefitted from her benevolence. As part of their grief process, they displayed the many products of her handiwork—various articles of clothing. Besides food and shelter, clothing is the next important basic to any person.

Peter's sending the mourners out of the room seems unusual, but this was time for him to be the means of God's intervention. Something similar can be seen in other Biblical examples. Elijah took a widow's dead son to an upper room, and then became the vessel through which life was "revived" (1 Kings 17:22). Elisha did something similar in resurrecting a couple's son, shutting the door so he was alone with the boy's body (2 Kings 4:33-34). Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead only after having "the crowd . . . put outside" the house (Matt. 9:25 NIV).

Kneeling and facing the body, Peter prayed. The content of it is not shared in Scripture. Upon completion of the prayer, he simply said, "Tabitha, arise" (Acts 9:40).

The raising of a deceased person continues to be a rare miracle, not something for which we should commonly pray. However, the number of times occurring in Scripture seems to indicate it might be in God's choice in particular situations. During the Indonesian Revival of the early 1970s, some individuals were resurrected from the dead, food was multiplied, and individuals were healed from lethal poisoning.

After helping Dorcas to stand, Peter called for the believers who had been waiting outside the room. She whom they grieved as dead was presented to them alive and well.

God's Resources

Seek the Lord. He longs to open His resources to you.—Corrie ten Boom

2. LYDIA: GRACIOUS HOST

A. Influential Merchant (Acts 16:9-14a)

⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. ¹⁰ And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them. ¹¹ Therefore loosing from Troas, we came with a straight course to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis; ¹² And from thence to Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony: and we were in that city abiding certain days. ¹³ And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither. ^{14a} And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us.

Lydia enters the Biblical narrative as a result of Paul and Silas being divinely directed to make Philippi the next stop on the second missionary journey. Verses 6 and 7 relate how the Holy Spirit, on two occasions, forbade them from continuing on what seemed to be a logical next stop for their ministry. During the night, Paul received a vision of a Macedonian man pleading for them to “come over” and “help” them (v. 9).

The vision of the Macedonian man only indicated the province. No city was mentioned. Now joined by Luke, the author of Acts (“we,” v. 10). Paul and Silas sailed to Macedonia, landing in the port of Neapolis. The Via Egnatia was one of the five major roads of the Roman Empire. The distance from Neapolis to Philippi was about ten miles.

Verse 12 describes Philippi as a “colony” because it was a city for Roman settlers. The emperor Augustus had settled a large number of veterans there. Being a royal colony gave them the privileges of Roman citizenship, and provided Rome with a military force near the Macedonian border.

Following the pattern of going to the Jews first, Paul had to find where they gathered on the Sabbath, since there was no organized synagogue. Ten men were needed for one to be organized.

Verse 13 finds Paul and Silas speaking to the women who gathered there. This seems to indicate no adult males were in attendance.

At this point, Lydia comes into the narrative. Though a Gentile, she had become an adherent of the Jewish religion. Verse 14 describes her as being a worshiper of God, even though she was from “the city of Thyatira,” where a pantheon of gods were worshiped. She also would have been part of a guild, whose members were involved with the same product. Each guild had its own god with religious festivals involving immoral activities.

On the basis of Lydia being identified as “a seller of purple,” it is assumed she was wealthy. The cloth known as “turkey red” produced from the madder root then was dyed purple. This dye came from processing a small gland of a marine mollusk. The costliness of this purple cloth made into garments became a mark of distinction. Notably, at the mockery of Jesus, the Roman soldiers placed a robe of purple on Him (Mark 15:17-20).

—*What was the connection between “a man of Macedonia” (v. 9) and “a certain woman” (v. 14)?*

B. Open-hearted Believer (Acts 16:14b-15, 40)

^{14b} Whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. ¹⁵ And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.

⁴⁰ And they went out of the prison, and entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed.

Everywhere Paul went, he preached Jesus, now at the riverside in Philippi. As Lydia listened to Paul’s message, the Lord opened her heart to the truths he shared. Her heart was fertile spiritual ground due to already having converted to Judaism and worshiping God. Lydia and her household then took the next step, being baptized in water. How convenient for baptism due to their meeting by the river! After her baptism, Lydia begged Paul’s company to accept the hospitality of her home.

This intense passion may have come from the Oriental custom of not initially accepting the first invitation and waiting for the potential host to persist in asking. However, Lydia also desired to know more of the Gospel. Her home also became the location for the newly founded church in Philippi.

Between verses 15 and 40 is the account of Paul and Silas being imprisoned on the charge of “promoting customs that are not legal” (v. 21 CSB). After having been whipped and their feet placed in stocks, Paul and Silas were singing and praying when an earthquake shook the prison, opening all the doors and loosening the chains. This set the stage for the prison-keeper and his household to accept Jesus.

Prior to leaving the city, Paul and his group went to Lydia’s home. Verse 40 states their encouraging the “brothers and sisters” (CSB) who had become members of the first church in Europe. A wealthy, God-fearing woman who accepted Jesus and opened her home became the foundation for the expansion of the Gospel on the European continent. Such is the potential impact of godly women in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

Praying and Doing

Mother Theresa (1910-1997) founded a congregation (order) dedicated to the poor, particularly the destitute of India. The following is one of the many quotes of this dedicated woman: “I used to pray that God would feed the hungry or do this or that, but now I pray that He will guide me to do whatever I’m supposed to do. I used to pray for answers, but now I’m praying for strength. I had to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us, and we change things.”

3. PHOEBE: GENEROUS SERVANT-LEADER (Romans 16:1-2)

¹ I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: ² That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also.

The three godly women in this lesson tend not to receive the same attention as those whose character and activities receive greater coverage in Scripture. Care needs to be exercised not to relegate them to such obscurity that we lose the lessons from their lives which are applicable today.

As the Apostle Paul concluded his epistle to the Romans, he penned an extended list of names. Most of them are identified by their relationship to Paul or by their work for the Lord. Phoebe stands first in this list. If she was the one who carried this epistle for Paul to Rome, a letter of recommendation was necessary when she arrived. If this were not the case, this godly woman still deserved the commendation Paul gave.

Paul provided the spiritual dimension by referring to her as “our sister” (v. 1). She was one with them in Christ. With that brief yet inclusive description, he described Phoebe as a “servant [*diakonos*] of the church . . . at Cenchrea.” “In Paul’s letters, *diakonos* is often used in a general sense as one who serves” (French Arrington).

Cenchrea is the name of the eastern port for the city of Corinth and the small town located there. Paul may have been the founder of the church in Cenchrea. Acts 18:18 records Paul’s stopping there to have his hair shaved as part of a vow he made to God.

Even though we do not know the specifics of Phoebe’s role in her church, these two verses point in the direction of her being a *servant-leader*. We hear this term on various occasions, but what does it entail? The leader part may seem desirable due to title, position, and authority, while servanthood may appear less desirable. It usually takes place behind the scenes, with little or no

public recognition. There may be physical strains and uncomfortable settings in order to provide the needed help. This may also be true in the role of a leader, but in different ways.

There are some characteristics of those who are servants in their role of leadership. First is a willingness to learn in order to become qualified in the various roles of a servant. When Jesus called some fishermen to follow Him, He indicated they would become “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). They knew the effort required to catch fish, but now they had to learn to fish for men.

Second, a servant-leader values one individual as highly as the rest. We see several examples of this in Jesus’ teaching and actions. In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd left the ninety-nine in order to find the one lost from the flock. Jesus did not avoid the lepers for fear of their being contagious. Jesus did not shun beggars because of their being physically blind and possibly unkempt. Also, He accepted Zacchaeus’ invitation in spite of his being a tree-climbing tax collector. All people are God’s wonderful creations and need to be cared for with dignity and respect.

Third, a servant-leader cares without considering a person’s family name, ethnic background, or financial status. The servant-leader ministers to people regardless of their personality, physical appearance, or intelligence. Everyone is on an equal basis with the heavenly Father, and we must maintain that as we serve.

Fourth, a servant-leader is willing to sacrifice personal comfort in order to care for someone else’s personal needs. They pattern their lives after the concept of the Eastern shepherd, who would risk injury and even their lives to protect the flock, and care for both the healthy and the weak whenever needed.

Phoebe remains hidden in obscurity in terms of specifics of her person and ministry. However, her being the first person in the listing of Romans 16 speaks to the quality of her life and spiritual ministry.

—From the list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6-8, which did Phoebe seem to have?

THE INTEGRAL ROLE OF WOMEN

Godly women are integral to the life of the church. Dorcas demonstrated benevolent care for the poor and needy, specifically providing clothing. Lydia was an example of hospitality. She opened her home for Paul and company to stay there, as well as a place for the church to gather. Although little is known about Phoebe, Paul gave her high commendation as a sister in Christ.

Daily Devotions

- M. God's Ordained Helper for Man (Genesis 2:18-25)
- T. Miriam Leads in Worship (Exodus 15:1, 19-21)
- W. Jael Gains the Victory (Judges 5:24-31)
- T. A Gentile Woman's Faith Rewarded (Matthew 15:21-28)
- F. The First Evangelist (John 20:11-18)
- S. A Legacy of Maternal Faith (2 Timothy 1:1-7)