

Look At What God Can Do: Power Over Death

Acts 9:36-42 (NIV84)

³⁶ In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who 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 the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. ⁴² This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.

Tabitha was so good. Her description in our Acts reading is "a disciple... who was always doing good and helping the poor." (verse 36) Her legacy was in that upstairs room where her body was placed until her impending burial. Widows were there wailing and mourning, showing off all the wonderful things that their friend Dorcas had made for them throughout her life. You couldn't walk into that upstairs room without seeing how many people she had helped.

In obituaries, it is very common to list the humanitarian efforts that the deceased had accomplished or at least emphasize what a good person they were. Maybe Tabitha's read like this: Tabitha of Joppa, known to her friends as Dorcas, died in her home in the year of our Lord 37 A.D. due to illness. She was loving and caring to all, always helping the poor. She dedicated her time to making clothes for the less fortunate. She is preceded in death by her mother and father. A funeral will take place on Wednesday. In lieu of flowers, please donate to the church in Joppa or donate clothing to the needy.

It wasn't fair. Tabitha was such a good person, dare I say it, a great person. She was always helping, always giving, always serving others with no thought that she should be paid back. She loved with actions as Jesus had taught her. Why would God take this most wonderful woman out of their lives? Why would he let her die? Why didn't he save her that she would keep doing more good in this world? She deserved better than to succumb to a sickness. She deserved to live.

Why does God take the good ones away? That's one of the hardest questions to ask, and many times we are left without a satisfactory answer. Nearly every funeral we go to or hear about causes us to ask, "Why did God take this person? Why does he cause so much sadness?" As we think about all the good that this person did, what they meant to us, how much we loved them, how much companionship they gave us, how could God justify taking this person away from me? How many of the widows in that upstairs room were bawling mainly because they could not wrap their mind around this atrocity?

In times of tragedy and hardship, it's easy to blame God. He's supposedly almighty and all-powerful, can cure every disease, and do the impossible. Why can't he be troubled to stop this pain in my life? Why does he have to take this person from me? How good is a God who allows such a good person to die?

The enemy of this story, though, is not God. The enemy in this Bible account, the enemy who really causes all the grief and heartache and pain to us because of loss is death. Death is a product of sin, the result of disobedience, the punishment for imperfection. Death is not a good thing; it's not natural. Sadly, we brought death into existence. We chose it. And we still suffer the consequences of that choice, that willful choice of disobedience against God.

Try as we may, none of us are good enough to stave off the enemy of death, to reverse this punishment. Dorcas, this beautiful and graceful woman who dedicated her life to doing good, helping the poor, making clothing for the less fortunate, she did not have enough good works to keep death at bay. She was not good enough to defeat death, to overcome her illness, or even to make her life better by what she did.

This is true for all of us. Our loved ones who have passed away were not good enough to defeat death or stave it off. No matter how many good works we do, no matter if we sell everything and give it all to the poor, no matter if we dedicate our lives to charity work and become the next Mother Theresa or St. Vincent de Paul, we will not accomplish enough to conquer death. Death is our enemy. We cannot defeat it.

So, why get Peter at Tabitha's death? He can't defeat death any more than she could have. Yet, he was nearby, in a city only a few miles away. He was one of the twelve apostles, had walked and talked and learned directly from Jesus. Maybe he can give us some words of comfort.

When Peter arrived, he didn't know exactly what to do. He didn't launch into a sermon. But he knew what he has seen. He had seen Jesus raise a little boy in the town of Nain back to life for his widowed mother. He saw Jesus bring a little girl back to life at her father Jairus' request. Peter witnessed the power of Jesus' voice to be enough to bring Lazarus back to life after four days of being dead in the tomb. Peter knows for certain that Jesus knows how to bring people back to life from the dead.

In fact, Peter knows that Jesus holds all the power over the fearsome enemy of death. It was Jesus himself who died, and then took his life back up again. Because Jesus rose, he showed the world that he is mightier than death itself. This enemy that none of us can stave off with good works, with medicine, or even the act of praying, God has conquered. The war has been decided even while the battle still rages. One day, we will see the end of this battle. Because Jesus rose from the dead, because he took his life back from the clutches of death, death will be completely annihilated. When Jesus returns on the Last Day, the dead will all be raised, and death will no longer exist. No one will ever die again after that Last Day.

Knowing that Jesus has power over death, that Jesus has defeated death, Peter also knew that Jesus did not raise everyone back to life during Jesus' earthly ministry. Peter doesn't know if this is the end of Tabitha's story here on earth or not. So he ushers everyone out and gets down on his knees and prays. He asks the almighty God to act as the one who holds power over the enemy of death. He must have got an answer, because after praying he "[turned] toward the dead woman [and] said, 'Tabitha, get up.' 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 the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive." (verse 40-41)

In one moment, the mourners were gathered around showing all the great things that Dorcas had done for them out of her love for her Savior, her commitment to follow Christ's commands to love not only in words but also in actions. Now Peter presents Tabitha to them alive. Peter is showing them what the Lord does, this is what the Lord has accomplished. The Lord raises people back from the dead. The Lord has power over death. The enemy of death is subjugated to the Lord.

Now, we know that not every believer gets to be raised to life within days after their death, actually very few ever have been. But the fact remains. The Lord holds the victory over death. He can reverse death at any moment he chooses.

So, why does God raise some and not others? Why does he take the good ones away? Maybe it's because he wants to relieve them from pain by bringing them to their heavenly home. Maybe he allows others to live, the not so good ones, in the hopes that they will yet believe in him and be saved. Only the Lord knows his reasons for why people die when they die and why he chooses to raise some and not others. What I do know, is that it's not about what I do that would make God favor me for preserving my life or raising me from the dead. That's not how it worked for Dorcas, and that's not how it works for us that our good works would hold death back.

Regardless of God's reasoning, we do know the effects of his power to raise people. In relaying Tabitha's resurrection account, Luke tells us that "this became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord." (verse 42) As people hear what the Lord has done, that he has raised someone from death to life, this causes people to believe in him. That's how God's Word works. Tabitha's story validates that faith that God will raise all of our bodies on the Last Day, that Jesus indeed has beaten death, and we will reap the benefits of that victory.

Tabitha believed that Jesus was her Savior. She was one of his disciples. She followed him through all the works of service, through her illness, and even to her death. She believed that God held power over death and had defeated it for her with his Easter resurrection. From that belief, she dedicated her life to doing good, helping the poor, and making clothing for the less fortunate. She bore much fruit being connected to the true vine of Jesus Christ.

How can you live your faith like Dorcas did? What fruit do you bear because you too are a disciple of Jesus, someone who believes that Jesus has conquered death and will raise you back to life one day? Maybe your fruit will show in what you do in church. People like you, maybe even you yourself, have used their talents to build this sanctuary to look like it is today. Someone built the cross, the baptismal font, the altar. Someone sewed the banners together. Someone put the stucco on the walls, trimmed down the wood paneling. Someone printed and cut out the little visitor cards in your pew. Someone gave their time to play the organ and piano, to use their voices in song. Some of you will donate items or your time and talents for Vacation Bible School. Some of you help Cara as part of the Care Committee to make meals for people. Some of you make time to visit with other members of church. Some of you sit on Church Council, the board of elders, act as a coordinator. Some of you take pictures, bring goodies for fellowship after service. Some of you dedicate your time teaching Sunday School, and so much more that you do in service to the Lord.

But not all your service is done here in the church. You also show your fruit of faith, your good works, in many other places. At your jobs, you work hard. At home, you take care of your children, keep the household running. You bring your children to church, to Sunday School, as a joyful work done for the Lord, that they would be connected to the one who has defeated death for you and them. At school, you listen to your teachers, pay attention in class, do your homework willingly and faithfully because you love your Lord and what he has done for you. You pray for people. You donate to charities. And the list can go on and on.

From Tabitha's life, we are encouraged to bear fruit, to do good for others here at church, in our homes, and in our world. We want people to see what we do out of appreciation for our God.

God has already promised to me and to you that he will raise us from the dead on the Last Day never to die again, that the enemy of death is completely under his control. Because God has conquered death for me, I want to show people what God has done for me by what I do for others following Dorcas' example. God has done so much for me. That's why we do things out of love for God. Amen.

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