

WIDOWS OF THE BIBLE

TABITHA: LESSON THREE

by Sandy Harber

"And it came to pass in those days, that she was sick and died." Acts 9:37a

After being introduced to Tabitha the author, Luke, tells us that she became sick and died "in those days." What days were these? Where does Tabitha fit in the history of the early Church? If we back up a few verses, Luke reported, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied" (v. 31). Tabitha's death occurred during the brief time (perhaps 10 years) when the Church had some rest from persecution by Jewish unbelievers.

The gospel had already spread through Judea, Galilee and Samaria. Local church groups had been established in many cities for the instruction and edification of believers. Jesus' Church was on course, following the roadmap that He had given at His ascension in 33 A.D. (Acts 1:7-9). The last instructions that Jesus gave to His followers were that they were to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This covered all three people groups: the Jews (in Jerusalem and Judea); the Samaritans (in Samaria), descendants of Jewish-Gentile mixed marriages (II Kings 17:24); and the Gentiles (in the uttermost part of the earth). [Note that all the dates given here are from Bishop James Ussher's *The Annals of the World*; some Bible scholars may differ by 1 to 3 years.]

Ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost (May 24, 33 A.D.), the Holy Spirit came upon the 120 believers gathered at Jerusalem in the upper room (Acts 1:13-15; 2:1-4). This included the original eleven disciples and Matthias, who replaced Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:26). Peter delivered a powerful sermon, which added 3,000 souls to the Church (Acts 2:41). Jerusalem was the first stop on Jesus' roadmap. The gospel spread throughout Jerusalem and converts were added to the Church daily (Acts 2:47). This brought opposition from the Jewish religious leaders, who tried to stop the witnesses by threatening, beating, and jailing them (Acts 5:18, 40). Violence against the believers rose to the level of a stoning when a disciple named Stephen became the first martyr that same year (Acts 7:57-60). The persecution in Jerusalem became so great that the believers fled to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). And, so, the gospel spread to points two and three on Jesus' roadmap: Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:4).

In 34 A.D., Philip the Evangelist (the Philip who was chosen, with Stephen and five other men, to attend to the business of ministering to the widows in their midst (Acts 6:1-6)) preached in Samaria and had such success that Peter and John were dispatched from Jerusalem (Acts 8:5-8, 14-15). When these Apostles laid their hands on the Samaritan believers they received the Holy Spirit as the Jewish believers had before them (Acts 8:16-17).

In 35 A.D., a Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted believers mercilessly, had a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ and became a believer (Acts 9:1-22). Saul turned his zeal for God toward persuading Jews that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah) and was so effective that he became the target of persecution himself (Acts 9:29). Therefore, in 37 A.D., his fellow believers took him to the Caesarea Seaport, put him on a ship, and sent him home to Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 9:29-30). The persecution calmed down with the departure of Saul (Acts 9:31).

In five years, Christianity had spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria, bringing Jews and Samaritans into one body. It was the Apostle Peter that the Lord had used to usher the Jews (by his sermon) and Samaritans (by the laying on of hands) into His Church. And it would be Peter who would bring the gospel to the last, and largest, people group: the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-45). God was preparing the way in 38 A.D., using the illness and death of a godly believer who was known for her good works and charity.

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Philippians 2:13