

WIDOWS OF THE BIBLE

TABITHA: LESSON FIVE

by Sandy Harber

"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." Acts 9:38

The Christians in Joppa were devastated by the passing of Tabitha, who was known for her charitable acts. They worked quickly to prepare her body for burial, which must occur before the sun went down that day. "Burial" did not involve the lowering of a coffin into a hole dug in the ground. Rather, due to the climate, the Jewish people were entombed, that is, placed in stone sepulchers or caves. The body would be washed, anointed with herbs and spices, wrapped in grave clothes (linen cloth), and placed on a shelf (or bench) inside the tomb. Tabitha's body was laid out in the upper room of her home, that is, the room located on the roof. The widows that she had ministered to attended to the preparation of her body, weeping. Loud crying and wailing was customary when someone passed away. Those who could afford it even hired professional mourners to weep (loudly).

The local church at Joppa had dispatched two men to make the ten mile journey to Lydda to find the Apostle Peter. Their mission was to bring Peter back to Joppa with them. Quickly. Why the urgency? The ten mile journey took three to four hours one way. Tabitha had to be buried before sundown. The two messengers would spend six to eight hours on the road, plus however much time was spent searching for Peter. Due to the tight timeline it seems likely that Tabitha died early in the morning and her friends or the servants were immediately aware of her passing. Perhaps the widows and/or other believers were at her bedside when she passed away. It may even be that the Christians were already planning to summon Peter, with the hope that he could heal her, but she died before they were able to put their plan into action.

Nevertheless, the believers dispatched two men to Lydda. Did the Christians at Joppa expect Peter to raise Tabitha from the dead? Or, at the very least, hope that he would do so? Five of the six Commentaries that I consulted indicated that the believers sent for Peter expecting him to revive Tabitha. There was no precedent for this hope. No Apostle had resurrected the dead yet. But Jesus had done so three times. And, didn't He give His Apostles the power to work miracles like He did? If this was in the minds of the Joppa Christians it is no wonder that they were anxious to bring Peter to Tabitha's bedside as quickly as possible. But we can't be dogmatic about this since Scripture does not state the motive for summoning Peter.

Perhaps we're reading too much into it because we know the end of the story. If so, what was their motive for bringing Peter to Joppa? And why the urgency? Given the high regard in which she was held, it could be that the believers felt that Tabitha's passing deserved Apostolic oversight. Peter's presence at her funeral would give her home going a little bump in prestige. Or, maybe, they wanted to honor her by bringing her good deeds to the attention of one of the most notable Christian leaders.

Have you ever thought about how you will be remembered after you have passed over to that heavenly shore? What will they say at your funeral? What legacy will you leave behind? Tabitha left behind garments sewn with love and weeping widows who mourned her passing and sang her praises. Tabitha's legacy was good works and charitable deeds. Those who knew her were inspired to honor her memory. They believed that she was worthy of the highest attention and praise. How do you want to be remembered?

"For we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." II Corinthians 5:10