

Thursday

Witnessing in Death

The impact of Tabitha's death

Our family recently said goodbye to a beloved grandfather, father, and husband. We sat around his bedside weeping, praying, and singing songs of hope. We watched his chest rise and fall and counted his breaths. We cried and laughed over all the memories of his kindness, patience, and generosity. He spent a lifetime serving God, and we know that he will be raised up in a body incorruptible, but the pain of saying goodbye to him in this life was still agonizing. As our vigil stretched from hours into days, we recognized that we were not meant to say goodbye or to watch the life slipping away from a loved one. We were made for eternal life.

Our family gathered, and so did our community. The outpouring of food and messages of comfort and hope from around the world are a testament to the ministry of my grandparents, who served and labored and loved so many. Acts 9 tells the story of a disciple who was similarly beloved: Tabitha (or Dorcas).

A WOMAN OF GOOD WORKS

We don't know much about Tabitha: how old she was, whether or not she was married, or if she had children. What we do know is that she was a disciple and was "full of good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36),¹ some of which included making clothes for widows (verses 37, 39). This met a very immediate need for the women in Joppa and seems to indicate that Tabitha was a woman of means, perhaps even the owner of a garment production business.² She certainly had the skill and resources to make different kinds of garments. Her designation as a disciple also suggests that she was a leader in the community of believers.

The death of a witness may be the end of a life, but it is not the end of the witness.

Tabitha's illness and subsequent death was a terrible blow to Christ's followers in Joppa. While my grandfather died at the end of a long and full life, Tabitha died prematurely. Her body was washed and laid in an upper room, where the widows gathered around her and wept. The very clothes they wore bore witness to her love and care for them and the community.

Not far away in the town of Lydda, Peter had healed a paralyzed man, and the news had spread through the region. The other disciples in Joppa sent messengers to Peter, urging him to come at once to Joppa, clearly hoping for a miracle. Peter arrived to find the believers in a state of deep sorrow. The widows who had gathered to mourn showed him the clothes she had made for them. Undoubtedly, Peter was moved by their testimo-

nies of Tabitha's life of service. He sent everyone out of the room, then prayed for her resurrection. In faith, he turned to the dead woman and said, "Tabitha, arise."

God breathed life back into her body, and she took Peter's hand and rose. Imagine the joy and delight when he presented her alive to the believers! As a result of her resurrection, many in Joppa believed in the Lord. Tabitha's death, which was a terrible and sorrowful thing, was turned into triumph in her resurrection. What a witness to proclaim that she had died and was brought back to life again!

DEATH AND DELAY

But what about those who die and remain dead? Haven't there been countless men, women, and children who have faithfully served God and yet have died in the prime of life? The war between God and Satan has resulted in many casualties, whether death has come early in life or at the end of many years. This is the nature of war. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us hope for life beyond the grave, when those who have died in Christ are raised up to live with Him (Rom. 6:8). But we are not yet immune to sickness and death—our bodies are still mortal.

How do we cope with the continued reality of death and dying? I have found great comfort in the knowledge that the death of a faithful believer is itself a kind of witness. At the end of his life, my grandfather could not examine a patient, give Bible studies, preach sermons, or even pray aloud. The witness was not in what he could or couldn't do, but in who he was: a man who was a friend of God.

On his deathbed he was surrounded by those who cherished the memories of his kindness and faithfulness, much like the widows

who surrounded Tabitha. Even as he lay dying, we received countless messages giving glory to God for the love he had shown to so many. The medical personnel were touched by the devotion of the family members and friends who scurried around his bedside taking care of him or sat singing or reading Bible passages. He had shown us how to love and offer comfort, and during his last days we took care of him as he had taken care of so many others.

The death of a witness may be the end of a life, but it is not the end of the witness. Whether the resurrection is soon after death, as with Tabitha, or delayed until the Second Coming, those who remain can continue the work of proclaiming God's message of truth, hope, and love. Let's carry on the legacies of those who have used their talents and resources to bless the communities around them. And may we ever give glory to the One who sustains and sits with us in our grief and who will someday wipe every tear from our eyes. ☺

¹ Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Teresa J. Calpino, *Women, Work and Leadership in Acts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), p. 141.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How can you use your talents and resources to benefit your community?
2. If you were to die today, what would your legacy be?
3. In what way can a believer's death be a witness?
4. What hope can we claim following the death of a loved one?