

# Lesson 13 | November 24, 2024

## Dorcas, Lydia, and Phoebe: Faithful Servants

**Study Text:** Acts 9:36–43; 16:9–40; Romans 16:1–2

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

**Key Verse: Proverbs 31:30**

A woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised (KJV).

A woman who fears the Lord will be greatly praised (NLT).

### Learning Objectives

- Students will affirm the effective ministry of godly women in their local church and honor their contribution to the kingdom of God.
- Students will embrace the importance of hospitality and regularly show it to others.
- Students will utilize their gifts, resources, and time to serve their local church and community.

## Introducing the Lesson

**Say:** As we finish up this series of lessons about godly women in Scripture, we're exploring the ways women contribute to the health and ministry of the Church. We'll look specifically at three women in the New Testament church: Dorcas, Lydia, and Phoebe.

### Discussion Starter—Appreciating Women in Our Church

**Say:** Our church is blessed with women who minister and serve in a variety of ways. Tell us about one of them who has made an impact on your life.

**Say:** On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on men and women alike. Speaking to the bystanders, Peter explained that this was fulfillment of a prophecy Joel made centuries earlier: “In the last days,’ God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. . . . In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on my servants—men and women alike—and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:17–18). As the New Testament church became a dynamic and growing influence in the world, both men and women were vital to its expansion.

In Galatians 3:26–29, Paul described what it meant to be God’s children. “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female,” he explained. “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (verse 28). For those who have become God’s children through faith in Jesus, every other identifier fades away, even those based on ethnicity, social standing, and gender. Cultural limitations are irrelevant as the Holy Spirit “alone decides which gift each person should have” (1 Corinthians 12:11) and what part they will play in God’s redemptive work. From the earliest days of the Church, we can see this principle at

work as women like Dorcas, Lydia, and Phoebe helped carry out the Great Commission.

### **Resource Packet Item 1: Women in Pentecostal Ministry**

The modern Pentecostal Movement includes many women who have played prominent ministerial roles. This handout briefly highlights how God works through women today, just as He did through Dorcas, Lydia, and Phoebe.

## **Part 1—Dorcas: Faithful and Healed Always Doing Kind Things**

Acts 9:36–39

**Say:** As the Church was being established, the apostle Peter traveled among the towns outside of Jerusalem to teach new believers and proclaim the gospel to those who hadn't yet heard it. Acts 9:32 tells us Peter had reached the town of Lydda, about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. There, he healed a man named Aeneas who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years (verses 32–35). When the townspeople saw Aeneas walking around, many believed in Jesus.

In the seaport town of Joppa, about 9–10 miles west of Lydda, lived another believer named Dorcas. She was known by her Greek name, Dorcas, and also an Aramaic name, Tabitha. Dorcas had a stellar reputation in her community, “always doing kind things for others and helping the poor” (Acts 9:36). But her good deeds did not prevent her from becoming sick and dying, apparently shocking the entire community. The news of Aeneas's healing in Lydda must have spread quickly, because although Dorcas's friends followed custom and washed her body, they did not wrap it in linen and spices for burial. Instead, their actions may indicate faith that God would act through Peter. They placed her body in an upstairs room and called for Peter to come from Lydda as soon as possible.

Peter left for Joppa right away. When he arrived, he was immediately shown into the upper room where Dorcas's body was lying. Although some at this time hired mourners to show the proper grief when someone died, the weeping widows described in verse 39 were genuine. They loved Dorcas dearly and had been recipients of her kindness and generosity. Sewing all kinds of clothes for the widows of her town, Dorcas had exemplified the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31, whose “hands are busy spinning thread” and who “extends a helping hand to the poor” (verses 19–20).

Both in the first century and today, certain believers are called to visible, prominent ministries like teaching, preaching, and leading others. Some may be tempted to place a higher value on ministries like these, but Dorcas's story reminds us of the significance of humbly loving people and providing for their needs. Her priorities were aligned with the teaching of James, who wrote, “Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you” (James 1:27). By serving the widows who lived nearby, Dorcas was serving the Church and God himself. Her example encourages us to use whatever gifts we have been given rather than wishing we had different ones.

### ***Discuss***

- What do the responses of Dorcas's friends to her death say about her life?
- How does Dorcas's example inspire you to reach out to the people around you?

### **Resource Packet Item 2: Showing Kindness**

Dorcas was “always doing kind things for others and helping the poor” (Acts 9:36). Following her example, your class will choose an individual or group to bless during the upcoming Christmas season. The handout includes ideas to get the conversation started and plenty of space for planning.

## **Raised to Life**

Acts 9:40–43

**Say:** Picture the upstairs room in Dorcas's house when Peter walked in several hours later. Mourners surrounded Dorcas's lifeless body. Widows wept and pressed close to Peter, showing him the clothes Dorcas had made for them. All this noise and activity may have made focused prayer difficult. For whatever reason, Peter sent everyone outside.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, Peter had seen Him clear the room of noise and distractions when He raised Jairus's daughter from the dead (Mark 5:37–43). Faced with a similar commotion, Peter also sent everyone out of Dorcas's room. In the quiet, he knelt and prayed. Then, Peter turned to Dorcas and spoke: “Get up, Tabitha” (Acts 9:40). Dorcas immediately opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. What a day of rejoicing for the believers in Joppa! News quickly spread and many people came to faith in Jesus, just as they had when Aeneas was healed in Lydda. Peter spent a long time in Joppa, no doubt teaching the people about all he had witnessed as Jesus' disciple. God used these two miracles to strengthen and build the Church in the region.

### ***Discuss***

- How was God glorified in Dorcas's story?
- How can you live in such a way that God is glorified in your story as well?

## **Part 2—Lydia: Convert, Evangelist, and Host**

### **Lydia's Conversion**

Acts 16:9–14

**Say:** Let's turn our attention to the second godly woman in this lesson. Lydia of Philippi would come to faith in Jesus during Paul's second missionary journey. Ministry in Philippi began as the result of the apostle's vision of a man pleading with him to come to Macedonia (Acts 16:9). In Philippi, a major city in that district, the Holy Spirit was already preparing a God-fearing woman to hear and believe the good news of Jesus.

When Paul and his missionary companions arrived in a new town, they would typically visit its synagogue to tell the Jewish citizens about Jesus the Messiah. However, the Roman colony of Philippi most likely didn't have a synagogue. Rather than doing the usual, Paul went to a place of prayer outside the city gate. There, he found a group of women who had gathered near the Gangites River. He and his companions sat down to speak with them. One of the women was Lydia, originally from Thyatira, which was a city known for its cloth-dyeing industry. Luke, the author of Acts, described Lydia as someone "who worshiped God" (Acts 16:14), and he was speaking as an eyewitness. During this segment of Acts (among others), Luke's use of the word *we* indicates he was personally traveling with Paul.

In His compassion, God had sent Paul to share the gospel with Lydia and the others gathered outside Philippi. As she listened, "the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying" (verse 14). No longer just a God-fearer, she was now a follower of Jesus. In fact, she was the first recorded Christian convert in Europe.

In the Book of Jeremiah, God promised, "If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you" (29:13–14). The Holy Spirit miraculously directed Paul and his companions to Philippi where they found Lydia looking wholeheartedly for God. Through their ministry, she found Him. God hears the prayers of people who seek Him, and if necessary, He opens and closes doors until His obedient servants arrive with the gospel. God himself beautifully orchestrates every salvation.

### ***Discuss***

- How did you first hear the gospel? Consider how God arranged the circumstances so you could learn about the salvation He offered.
- Read Matthew 9:35–38. How did Jesus respond to people who were lost? How can we participate in His plan to reach them?

## **The Philippian Church Begins**

Acts 16:15, 40

**Say:** Lydia immediately responded to her newfound faith in Jesus in two ways: sharing the good news with her household and supporting Paul's ministry.

Maybe Lydia's servants were present when she heard the gospel on the riverbank, or maybe she went home, shared the message, and brought them to be baptized later. Either way, it was important to her that the entire household knew and followed Jesus. Pointing to her commitment and faith, she asked Paul and his companions to stay at her home. As a successful businesswoman, she had the resources to provide for them and almost certainly intended to evangelize friends and colleagues from her home. Luke simply says, "She urged us until we agreed" (Acts 16:15). From these small beginnings, it's likely that one of the strongest New Testament churches was born.

Soon after Lydia's conversion, Paul and Silas were imprisoned. They were miraculously freed after singing and praying around midnight. These events led to the jailer and his entire household believing in God. Once again, God had placed His servants where

they could share the gospel with those who were ready to receive it. When Paul and Silas left the prison, they returned to Lydia's home. By this time, believers were gathering at her home (verse 40). In fact, Luke's shift from using the word *we* at this point indicates he stayed behind in Philippi to carry on the work of the ministry. The church in Philippi would continue to grow and thrive. In his letter to the Philippian believers written from prison about ten years after the events of Acts 16:40, Paul would have no doctrinal corrections to offer. Instead, he would look back fondly on their time together, possibly even noting that day by the river when Lydia was the first to believe (Philippians 1:3–5).

### **Resource Packet Item 3: Showing Hospitality**

Lydia set a beautiful example of believing faith and generous hospitality. Students will read several Scriptures to discover what the Bible says about showing hospitality.

#### ***Discuss***

- How would you describe your initial response to the gospel? How does your conversion impact your behavior?
- Describe a time when someone's hospitality had a positive influence in your life.
- How can we overcome our hesitation to offer hospitality to one another? How can our hospitality encourage and build up those we invite into our homes?

## **Part 3—Phoebe: Church Deacon**

Romans 16:1–2

**Say:** We'll spend the rest of our lesson discussing Phoebe, a church leader in Cenchreae (*Sen-KREE-uh*). She was chosen by God—and by extension, Paul—for a mission so important that we are still benefiting from the results today.

Paul was probably in Corinth when he wrote the Book of Romans in 56–57 AD, near the end of his third missionary journey. After twenty years of ministry, he had seen the Church spread across the Roman Empire. As he prepared to travel to Rome and then carry the gospel west from there, he wrote this letter to introduce himself and the message of Christ he preached.

Romans is not only Paul's longest letter, but it is the most clearly structured. It is his *magnum opus*, his gospel manifesto. It is widely accepted that Phoebe delivered Paul's letter from Corinth to Rome. She is mentioned only once in Scripture when, in Romans 16:1–2, Paul commends her to the believers in Rome before greeting thirty-five of them by name. Phoebe's name indicates she was a Gentile, and the fact she was able to travel freely in that time meant she was probably a widow.

After calling Phoebe "our sister," Paul describes her as *diakonos* (*dee-AH-kuh-nos*) in the church in Cenchreae. The *New Living Translation* and others correctly translate this word as "deacon." The King James Version may translate *diakonos* as "servant" in this verse, but it is an anomaly. Although *diakonos* is sometimes used for "servant" in the Gospels (as in John 2:9), it nearly always describes an official church ministry position



in the Epistles. Of the 22 times *diakonos* occurs in the Epistles, the King James Version translates it as “minister” 18 times, “deacon” three times, and “servant” only once—here in Romans 16:1 to describe Phoebe. Elsewhere in the Epistles, *diakonos* is used to describe Paul, Timothy, Apollos, Tychicus, and Epaphras, all recognized as authority figures in the Church. This is a reminder that translating Scripture from its original languages always involves interpretation.

Paul regarded Phoebe highly, challenging the church in Rome to “welcome her in the Lord as one who is worthy of honor among God’s people” (verse 2). Paul uses a unique word in verse 2 to describe Phoebe: *prostatis* (*proh-STAH-tis*), which is translated as “helpful” (NLT) or “succorer” (KJV; meaning “one who gives relief”). The word *prostatis* comes from another Greek word meaning “set over” and is best translated “a woman set over others,” “a female guardian,” or “a patroness.” Although the noun is used nowhere else in Scripture, its verbal form always implies leadership (“leadership ability” in Romans 12:8; “those who are your leaders” in 1 Thessalonians 5:12; “managing” in 1 Timothy 3:12).

Phoebe held a position of leadership in the Cenchræe church and was especially trusted and appreciated by Paul. The apostle went on to list several other faithful women in Romans 16, all of whom proved that God used women in meaningful ways in the New Testament church.

1. *Priscilla*—Each time Priscilla and her husband Aquila are mentioned in the New Testament, her name is listed first, likely indicating she was the primary minister. They were tentmakers like Paul and had housed him in Corinth. They moved with him to Ephesus where they mentored Apollos. At some point, they risked their lives for Paul, possibly during the riots in Corinth (Acts 18) or Ephesus (Acts 19). When Paul wrote this letter, Priscilla and Aquila were living in Rome, and the church met in their home.
2. *Mary*—Commended for her hard work, this Mary is mentioned only here in the New Testament.
3. *Junia*—Although some versions use a masculine form of this name, the Early Church fathers and commentators up to the thirteenth century all recognized Junia as a woman. Paul called her and Andronicus (*An-druh-NIGH-kuhs*) his kinsmen, which might mean they were his relatives or merely fellow Jews. Having been imprisoned with Paul at least once, they were distinguished among the apostles. They had become Christians even before Paul and were possibly connected with the Jerusalem church.
4. *Tryphena* (*Try-FEE-nuh*)—a slave name
5. *Tryphosa* (*Try-FOH-suh*)—a slave name (Tryphena and Tryphosa were likely sisters or even twins.)
6. *Persis*—may have been an older woman since Paul used the past tense of the word *labor*
7. *Rufus’s mother*—It has been suggested that this Rufus was the son of Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus’ cross (Mark 15:21). If so, Rufus’s mother was likely Simon’s wife. Paul’s implication was that Rufus’s mother had treated Paul like her own son.
8. *Julia*—no other details provided

9. *Sister of Nereus (NEE-roos)*—no other details provided

Women held integral roles in the Early Church despite having few rights and little freedom in the first century. Paul's wording in Romans 16 (such as "labored . . . in the Lord" in verse 12) indicates that some women probably were engaged in preaching, leading, and prophesying. Luke bears witness in Acts 21, describing the four daughters of Philip the Evangelist as having "the gift of prophecy" (verse 9). Jesus had set the bar high by radically breaking cultural norms to interact with and validate women. Early believers would not have been surprised to witness the ongoing fulfillment of the Pentecost promise that "your sons and daughters will prophesy" (2:17).

**Discuss**

- What are some of the reasons people might disqualify themselves from serving in the Church?
- How do the stories of Dorcas, Lydia, and Phoebe inspire you to serve God and His people?

**What Is God Saying to Us?**

**Say:** Dorcas, Lydia, and Phoebe served God faithfully and used their gifts and resources to bless others and spread the gospel. Dorcas sewed clothing for widows and cared for the poor. Lydia believed the gospel and lived out her faith through hospitality, generosity, and encouragement. Phoebe led others in her local church and helped Paul and his companions however she could, even delivering his letter to the church in Rome. We have also been given gifts to bless our local church and community. We should never discount what He has given us or wish for someone else's gifts. Instead, let's focus on glorifying Him with what we have.

**Resource Packet Item 4: Your Role in the Local Church**

Like Dorcas, Lydia, and Phoebe, we should each fulfill whatever role God has chosen for us. Students will prayerfully read a passage from 1 Corinthians and journal their response, asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance. This handout would work best as a take-home page for personal devotions.

**Living It Out**

**Ministry in Action**

- Look for a specific way to serve in your church this week. Contact a pastor or ministry leader and ask how you could make someone else's load a little lighter.
- Take a meal to someone who tirelessly serves at your church. Tell them you recognize their efforts and appreciate all they do.
- Pray about how the Lord wants you to serve your church family in the coming year. Remember, there are no small tasks. God sees and values every effort to help spread the gospel.

**Daily Bible Readings**

Monday:

Helper and Companion.

Genesis 2:18–25

Tuesday:

Miriam Leads in Worship.

Exodus 15:1, 19–21

Wednesday:

Jael Gains the Victory.

Judges 5:24–31

Thursday:

A Gentile Woman's Faith Rewarded.

Matthew 15:21–28

Friday:

The First Evangelist.

John 20:11–18

Saturday:

A Legacy of Maternal Faith.

2 Timothy 1:1–7