

## Faith Of Our Mothers

On Sunday, we celebrated our mothers by looking at the story of a great woman of faith as told in an ancient book called “The Acts of Paul and Thecla.”

1. Warm-up Question: Tell us something important you learned from the example of your mother, grandmother, or someone who has mothered you.
2. Because of the example of Jesus, gender barriers began falling in early Christian churches. After all, Jesus had chosen Mary Magdalene to be the first to proclaim his resurrection, Junia was an esteemed Apostle in the early church, and Paul himself declared, “In Christ Jesus . . . there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, **male or female**, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28.
  - a. What are the ramifications of Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:28?
  - b. Jeff said, “As the decades passed and people who had not known Jesus personally began flooding into the church, carrying with them cultural gender stereotypes, patriarchy began to reassert itself in the church.” Why do you think gender roles have been so deeply ingrained in human culture?
3. “The Acts of Paul and Thecla” was probably written around 100 A.D. (about 60 years after the time of Christ) as push back against the patriarchy creeping back into the early church. As best we can tell, Thecla was a real person, though her story may have been amped-up a bit for dramatic effect – kind of like a movie inspired by a true story. Thecla’s story unfolds in three basic movements, like a 3-act play. To get started, read the passages on p. 3 under the heading “Act I.”
  - a. In the passages we just read, Thecla was about to launch into a conventional life. She was engaged to be married to Thamyris. Then she heard Paul preaching about charity, faith in Christ, and prayer. She was so enthralled, her mother couldn’t pry her away from the window. What do you imagine might have been going on inside Thecla as she listened?
  - b. Why do you think Thecla’s mother got so furious she called for her daughter to be burnt? What must have been going on in her mother’s head? How do you think this made Thecla feel?
  - c. Why do you think Thecla refused to recant, even when faced with death?
  - d. Jeff suggested that the key lesson we’re supposed to learn from Act I is: **Followers of Jesus are not afraid to defy cultural and familial expectations.** Jesus defied expectations, and he calls us to do the same. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” Matthew 10:37. What do you think that verse means? Why is it such an important discipleship principle?

- e. In your own life, where are you feeling boxed-in by the pressure of culture and the expectations of others? Do you think God might be calling you to break out? What might that look like?
4. In Iconium, Thecla was delivered from being burned at the stake by a sudden rainstorm. She then accompanied Paul on a missionary journey to Antioch, where she was assaulted by a powerful man, fought him off, then was sentenced to death by wild beasts for resisting the man. Read the passages on p. 3 for Act II.
- a. What most strikes you about these passages?
  - b. Every horror imaginable was thrown at Thecla, yet nothing could prevail against her. Like the Bible says, “No weapon fashioned against you shall prosper, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord.” Isaiah 54:17. What do you think that verse means?
  - c. Jeff shared the story of the multiple hardships in his Grandma’s life. Despite all her hardships, Jeff said, “She sang to God and lived with serenity.” He suggested that the lesson for us from Act II is: **Life can’t throw at you anything that is greater than the power of God that’s in you.** “The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” I John 4:4. What is life throwing at you right now to try to take you down? What might it look like for you to respond like Thecla?
5. Read the passages on p. 3 for Act III. By her example, Thecla had shown that anything a Christian man could do, she could do. So, in Act III, Paul commissioned her to teach the Gospel. She ended up settling in Seleucia and founding a monastery from which she pursued her teaching and healing ministry. From this, Jeff drew the third lesson: **In one form or another, each of us (regardless of gender or station in life) is sent into the world, like Thecla, to share our faith and heal the broken.**
- a. For many, Thecla was the mother of their faith. For you personally, who is the principle mother of your faith (regardless of gender)? In other words, who is primarily responsible for you finding God in your life? How do you feel about that person?
  - b. Do you feel you have a responsibility to share your faith with others? If so, what are some practical ways we can share our faith?
  - c. If you were to share the story of your faith journey – and only had 60 seconds to do it – what would you say? What’s your “testimony”?
  - d. Given where you find yourself in life right now, who is God calling you to share Jesus with?
  - e. Do you feel you have a responsibility to be a healing force in the world? If so, in your life right now, who is God calling you to help heal?

# Excerpts From The Acts of Paul and Thecla

## Act I

**Thecla 2:1.** While Paul was preaching [a] sermon in the church which was in the house of Onesiphorus, a certain virgin named Thecla (betrothed to a man named Thamyris) sat at a certain window in her house. From whence, by the advantage of a window in the house where Paul was, she both night and day [for three days] heard Paul's sermons concerning God, concerning charity, concerning faith in Christ, and concerning prayer. Nor would she depart from the window, till with exceeding joy she was subdued to the doctrines of faith.

**Thecla 5:7.** “[The governor] said to Thecla, ‘Why do you not, according to the law of the Iconians, marry Thamyris? She stood still, with her eyes fixed upon Paul; and finding she made no reply, Theoclia, her mother cried out saying, ‘Let this unjust creature be burnt; let her be burnt in the midst of the theater, for refusing Thamyris, that all women may learn from her to avoid such practices!’ Then the governor . . . ordered Paul to be whipped out of the city, and Thecla to be burnt.”

## Act II

**Thecla 9:1.** Then Thecla was stripped naked and thrown into the place appointed for fighting with the beasts: and the lions and the bears were let loose upon her. But a she-lion, which was of all the most fierce, ran to Thecla, and fell down at her feet. Upon which the multitude of women shouted aloud. Then a she-bear ran fiercely towards her, but the she-lion met the bear, and tore it in pieces. Again a he-lion, who had been wont to devour men, ran towards her; but the she-lion encountered the he-lion, and they killed each other. Then the women were under a greater concern, because the she-lion, which had helped Thecla, was dead. Afterwards they brought out many other wild beasts; but Thecla stood with her hands stretched towards heaven, and prayed; and when she had done praying, she turned about, and saw a pit of water. The women seeing this, cried out and said, “Do not throw yourself into the water!” And the governor himself cried out, to think that the sea-calves [would] devour so much beauty. Notwithstanding all this, Thecla threw herself into the water, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. But the sea-calves when they saw the lightning and fire, were killed, and swam dead upon the surface of the water, and a cloud of fire surrounded Thecla, so that as the beasts could not come near her.

**Thecla 9:17.** Upon this the governor called Thecla from among the beasts to him, and said, ‘Who art thou? And what are thy circumstances, that not one of the beasts will touch thee?’ Thecla replied, ‘I am a servant of the living God; and as to my state, I am a believer on Jesus Christ, in whom God is well pleased; and for that reason none of the beasts could touch me.’”

## Act III

**Thecla 10:4.** “Then Thecla arose, and said to Paul, ‘I am going [back] to Iconium.’ Paul replied to her, ‘Go and teach the word of the Lord.’”

**Thecla 10:16.** “A good report was spread everywhere of Thecla, and she wrought several miraculous cures, so that all the city and adjacent countries brought their sick to that mountain [where she lived], and before they came as far as the door of the cave, they were instantly cured of whatsoever distemper they had. The unclean spirits were cast out, making a noise; all received their sick made whole, and glorified God, who had bestowed such power on the virgin Thecla.”