

Praise for *Uncommon Virtues*

Uncommon Virtues invites you back in time to be inspired by the women who did life with the Cappadocian Fathers. Their virtue-filled lives call modern-day Christians to a life of holiness. Sunberg and Hadley use both history and imagination to allow us to catch a glimpse of ordinary people whom God made extraordinary. Lean in to hear the voice of the Father calling us to a deeper life.”

Rick Harvey, Lead Pastor
Bethany First Church of the Nazarene
Bethany, OK

“In a world of shallow spirituality, we desperately need models of depth, virtue, and transformative practice. In *Uncommon Virtues* we are given a fresh vision of what a flourishing, deep life in God looks like. What I most appreciate is that the voices highlighted in this book are church mothers. How refreshing! Sunberg offers us a wonderful framework of a life marked by God’s grace and an indispensable awareness of the lives, stories, and impact of a few godly women of the fourth century, who in ordinary ways model for us an extraordinary life in God.”

Rich Villodas, Lead Pastor
New Life Fellowship Church
New York City, NY

Uncommon Virtues is a huge, sparkling gem. Sunberg opens a window into Cappadocian theosis in the lives of seven amazing women of virtue. Together they are at the heart of the impact of two remarkable families of the fourth century—and, perhaps, of all Christendom. Sunberg’s writing is eloquent, inspiring, and well referenced. Her work gives long-overdue attention to the impact of virtuous women on the formation of Christian orthodoxy.”

Dr. Jonathan S. Raymond, President Emeritus
Trinity Western University
Langley, British Columbia

“Come, drink deeply from the well of church history, from the wisdom of the Cappadocian Mothers, and from the extraordinary grace of God through these words. Dare to read it with openness to the Spirit and you just might catch a vision of the virtuous and holy life that can be lived out in your ordinary, everyday life.”

Tara Beth Leach, Lead Pastor
First Church of the Nazarene
Pasadena, CA

From Carla

*To my daughters, Christy and Cara, who have shown me
what it means to be uncommon in the midst of the common.*

From Rich

*To my wife, Tawnya, whose faith, wisdom, and knowledge began
influencing my theology from the day we married and who has
supported my ambitions both ridiculous and inspired:
you are and always will be my perfect companion
and a mother of uncommon virtue.*

UNCOMMON
VIRTUES

*Seven Saints
Who Shaped Our Faith*

CARLA D. SUNBERG
with RICHARD ALAN HADLEY



THE FOUNDRY
PUBLISHING

Copyright © 2018 by Carla D. Sunberg
The Foundry Publishing
PO Box 419527
Kansas City, MO 64141
thefoundrypublishing.com

978-0-8341-3747-9

Printed in the
United States of America

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Cover and interior illustrations: Juliet Venter
Cover design: Mike Williams
Interior design: Sharon Page

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sunberg, Carla D., author.

Title: Uncommon virtues : seven saints who shaped our faith / Carla D. Sunberg, with Richard Alan Hadley.

Description: first [edition]. | Kansas City, MO : Foundry Publishing, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018023837 (print) | LCCN 2018028727 (ebook) | ISBN 9780834137486 (ebook) | ISBN 9780834137479 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian women saints. | Women in Christianity. | Church history—Primitive and early church, ca. 30-600. | Virtues.

Classification: LCC BR1713 (ebook) | LCC BR1713 .S86 2018 (print) | DDC 270.2092/52 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018023837>

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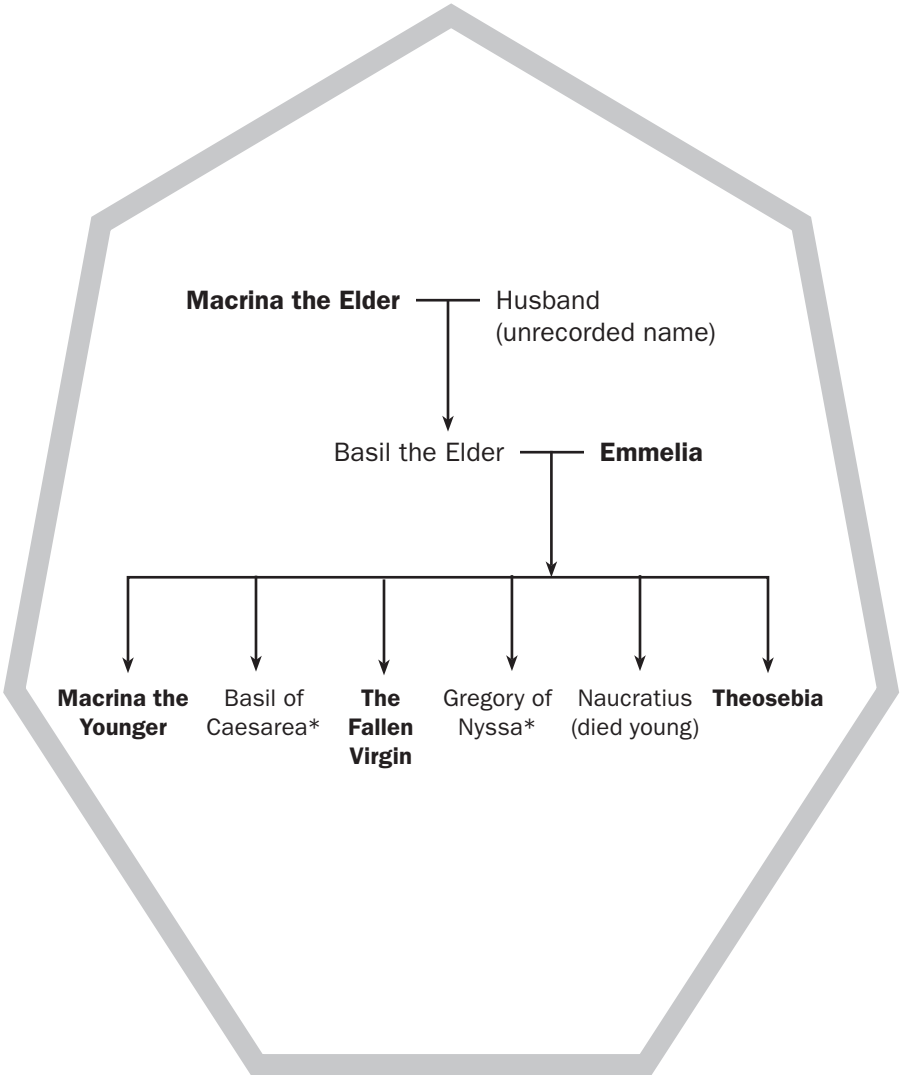
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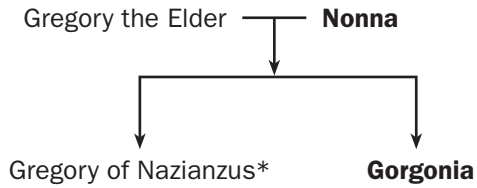
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CAPPADOCIAN MOTHERS



†Both families included members not shown in these truncated family trees. For clarity's sake, only names mentioned in this book appear here.

FAMILY TREES†



*These three comprise the group we know today as the Cappadocian Fathers.

INTRODUCTION



On Virtue

At the heart of Wesleyan thinking, there is a passion for virtue, or an outward, moral expression of our faith. Virtue is that silent witness whose presence tells us the Spirit of God is in residence. Wesley did not view virtue as a dutiful burden. Rather, virtue empowered and produced joy and a sense of completeness, seen in the fruit of the Spirit. The virtuous were the ones who could identify with the apostle Paul's experience of contentment in whatever state he found himself. Virtue produces a unique kind of optimism. Within the wondrous ecology of an interactive relationship with a holy God, this optimism thrives. It is by the experience and cultivation of virtue that the welfare of the person, family, and community erupts into genuine human flourishing; into healthy, vibrant lives. Success, excellence, and the realization of purpose and identity are often the ways in which we express what we imagine to be ourselves functioning at our full potential. Virtue audaciously insists that our full potential is nothing less than the reflexive response to human vice with attitude and action that reflect the divine love of God. These virtues come to us by way of revelation

through a real relationship with the Spirit of God and by cultivation through discipleship, personal discipline, and practice.

In our day Christianity asserts much on the promise of salvation by the profession of faith. But little is being said about the faithfulness that was meant to follow. If we think virtue is an outdated notion or that anyone who tries to live a holy life is working too hard and not trusting in grace, we should ask ourselves what Jesus was doing on the Mount of Olives. Jesus's ministry was characterized by a compelling call to repentance and a passion to bring about complete healing. He met numerous people, and what he witnessed was not lost on him. Consider what Jesus is saying in the infamous Sermon on the Mount. What impels him to preach this message beginning with "Blessed are those who . . ."? Jesus encountered ordinary people trapped in despair, sad, and without hope. His first sermon of record is a divine response to the sickness of the needy surrounding him. Jesus had a lot to say about the virtuous life. Interestingly, Jesus informs us in the Beatitudes that virtue and human flourishing go hand in hand. So we must ask ourselves whether we really believe the incarnate Word comes to all humanity, takes a look around, and preaches this specific sermon in response to a persistent human condition, a dis-ease of the body and soul—only to kill time until Golgotha. Jesus cautioned impulsive, would-be disciples to count the cost before following him. In a world of instant access to information, money, and entertainment, anything that demands a process, discernment, or discipline becomes less and less common. We are believers living in a day when the virtue-filled life has become uncommon.

The church, historically, has identified the primary virtues as chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility. Practicing them, it was once taught, would protect against temptation from their counterparts, the seven deadly sins.

Additionally, the original four cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, courage, and prudence were often depicted as female allegorical figures. Therefore, having women serve as our models for the seven uncommon virtues we've chosen for this book is fitting to our exploration.

This slight glimpse into their lives may up-end our contemporary approach to faith. Boldly, the lives exhibiting these uncommon virtues challenge us to no longer demand Jesus come into our hearts and lives. Rather, they call out with the same voice that once cried out along a Galilean seashore: "Follow me." These ancient witnesses give us a taste of what genuine human flourishing may look like. It flows out of them from an active relationship with God. Each of them shares this trait in common: a determined will to become one with God's heart and enter into God's holiness. In so doing, they work out their salvation not by human works but through God's soul-dignifying, mercy-filled works that Christ began and continues to do through us.

In the lived experience of the uncommon virtues, we will know our Lord better, hear him more clearly, and trust him more fully. In the simplest terms, virtues are how we dignify every human soul through obedience to the order of holy love at every occasion. Love is the only conductor of virtue.

—Rich





THECLA



Chastity

“Thus suffered that first martyr and apostle of God,
the virgin Thecla, who came from Iconium at eighteen
years of age; afterwards, partly in journeys and travels,
and partly in a monastic life in the cave,
she lived seventy-two years, so that she was
ninety years old when the Lord took her.”

—*The Acts of Paul and Thecla*

Selecting a popular name for a baby is not something new. Choosing the name *Thecla* for a girl in the fourth century would not have been unusual, for this name and all that it represented had become legendary. But let's back up just a little and enter into the world of the fourth century.

The Romans were a highly civilized people who considered themselves extremely religious with the worship of numerous gods commonplace. The cities and transportation systems were highly modern with indoor plumbing, running water (hot and cold),

broad streets, and an advanced mail delivery system after which the Pony Express in the United States would be patterned many centuries later. Value was placed on education, and young men with talent and cultural standing were afforded the finest opportunities, the very best studying at the university in Athens.

Christianity had been growing and spreading for nearly three hundred years. Most of Roman society still looked down on Christians, who were thought to be non-religious because they only worshiped one God. Their behavior threatened the norm of Roman culture and society. As a result they were often persecuted, depending on the temperament of the sitting emperor. Despite the persecution, Christianity continued to gain strength. Great leaders appeared over time, shaping and preparing theology and a pathway for the future of the church. Writings circulated, some of which became part of the canon of Scripture and others that were determined to be apocryphal. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a document that appeared near the end of the second century, tells the story of a woman named Thecla who was a disciple of Paul.

So Who Was Thecla?

While Thecla is not a direct relative of the Three Cappadocians, she is a part of the collective female history that informs their theology. Before the arrival of Macrina—the sister of Basil and Gregory—who became a leader in her own right, third- and fourth-century Cappadocia already had a female virgin who had become a legend and a hero. Surprisingly, it was not Mary, the mother of Jesus but, rather, a woman by the name of Thecla.¹ Her very existence seems to be controversial in nature, which raises the

1. Averil Cameron, “Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity,” in *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History*, Averil Cameron, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 193.

question of why. Both written historical documents and archaeological evidence point to her existence. A shrine in her honor developed in the area of Seleucia, where thousands of pilgrims every year went to worship God. This shrine developed around the site where it is believed that Thecla concluded her years of ministry.² On a hillside above the ruins of the city of Ephesus lies additional evidence of her existence in the form of a long-abandoned cave in which are found the remnants of a church. This cave, known today as the Paul and Thecla Cave, contains a series of frescoes that depict the apostle Paul along with two women. In the fresco that depicts the story about Thecla found in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, we discover two women, one identified as Theoclia and the other as Thecla.

Though contemporary historians may debate the existence of a woman named Thecla, the reality is that, by the fourth century, Thecla had become a legend—enough so that the name had become very popular. Gregory Nazianzen even wrote a letter to a female friend named Thecla.³ Therefore, when a young mother named Emmelia was told that her daughter was to bear this secret

Mary, the mother of Jesus, does not gain much traction as a figure until the theological arguments in which she becomes the theotokis, or the “bearer of God.”

2. Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

3. Gregory Nazianzen (PG 70:63). Specifically, Nazianzen's “Epistle 36 to Thecla,” written in 389, and “Epistle 37 Also to Her.” See also Полное Собрание Творений Святых Отцов Церкви и Церковных Писателей в Русском переводе: Святитель Григорий Богослов Творения: Том второй. Сибирская Благовонница, Москва 2006, 453–54. These are other Theclas who were contemporaries of Nazianzen. In reference to the practice of naming daughters Thecla, see also Rena Pederson, *The Lost Apostle: Searching for the Truth about Junia* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 61.

name, there were implications involved—for Emmelia would have been raised having heard these legendary stories.⁴

The historical arguments for the existence of Thecla come from *The Acts of Paul*, an apocryphal document from the second century that contains a segment known as *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Throughout history this account has been deemed controversial, and Tertullian—a Christian leader in the second and third centuries—was one of those who shared skepticism regarding the document’s authenticity. He denounced the document as being the fictional writing of a minister from an area of modern-day Turkey, an assessment that may or may not be true, but when we place Tertullian’s words into their proper context, we discover that he was actually concerned with the priestly acts of women. Tertullian’s problem was that in *The Acts* Thecla baptizes herself, and he may have been more concerned with condemning this specific activity rather than declaring that she only existed in the imagination of a presbyter who wanted to impress the apostle Paul.

On the other hand, Methodius, another early church leader, seemed to accept the fact of her existence. He utilized Thecla’s voice in one of his writings, *Banquet on the Ten Virgins*, and referred to her education, which he said had been provided by the apostle Paul. “I most willingly hail thy readiness, O Thecla, in which I confide to give me fitting discourse, in accordance with thy powers; since thou wilt yield to none in universal philosophy

4. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, trans. Elizabeth A. Clark in *Women in the Early Church: Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 13 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983), 237–38. Original Greek *De Vita Macrinae [DVM]*, 46.949.

and instruction, instructed by Paul in what is fitting to say of evangelical and divine doctrine.”⁵

In *Banquet on the Ten Virgins* it was Thecla who provided the longest speech and argument in favor of virginity, a discussion that was really about the choice of celibacy for certain followers of Christ. For women like Thecla, this choice provided an opportunity to devote oneself completely to Christ and to bear spiritual children. The challenges of married life at that time were great. Many women died young in childbirth, with childbearing being a woman’s primary responsibility in life. Marriage was not seen as a happy union but a practical arrangement for social construct. Entire consecration to Christ by way of a life of virginity or celibacy offered the prospect of total devotion to Christ and ministry. Methodius praised Thecla for the way in which she articulated her faith: “What, then, would you have said, if you had listened to herself, speaking fluently, and with easy expression, with much grace and pleasure? So that she was admired by everyone who attended, her language blossoming with words, as she set forth intelligently, and in fact picturesquely, the subjects on which she spoke, her countenance suffused with the blush of modesty; for she is altogether brilliant in body and soul.”⁶

Though Thecla was seen as the role model of virginity in her day, there continue to be modern scholars who find it difficult to determine the exact placement of her story. Dame Averil Cameron states that the story “is not simply filled with motifs of celibacy

5. Methodius, *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6 [ANF6]. His reference to Thecla (PG 48:71).

6. *Ibid.* (PG 48:87).

and asceticism, but also belongs somewhere within the still mysterious literary world of second- and third-century Greek fiction.”⁷

Her legend, however, was significant to Gregory Nyssen, or he would not have included her name when recounting the life of his older sister, Macrina (the Younger). The Cappadocians built their theology of holiness on this assumed knowledge of one who had gone before. But why would Thecla’s story be repressed, and Macrina’s voice lost, until the twentieth century? Maybe there is something unique in the lives of Thecla and Macrina that was seen as a threat to traditional church structures. Because the Cappadocians believed so fiercely in holiness and the possibility that all could reflect the image of God, they allowed space for traditional roles to be flexible. Within this framework, the Cappadocians saw hope, but others may have seen danger. What may be gained from the lives of Thecla and Macrina is hope—not for women alone but for all of humanity. They both transcended the traditional barriers of their day to become known as holy women of God.

Whether or not one can prove that Thecla truly lived, by the time of the Cappadocians, her character certainly existed and had widespread influence in the Christian world.⁸ She had become the “exemplar of virginity for those church fathers who were anxious to promote asceticism.”⁹ Interestingly, in *The Acts*, Thecla is seen as a martyr, but by the fourth century, she is clearly the voice of the life of virginity and asceticism. Even Nyssen refers to Thecla

7. Cameron, “Virginity as Metaphor,” 193. See also Léonie Hayne, “Thecla and the Church Fathers” in *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 48, no. 3 (September 1994), 209–18. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1584094?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents. “Thecla is a name rather than a person” (210).

8. Interestingly, in 1969, the Roman Catholic Church removed the names of some of the saints, including Thecla. She continues to be remembered in the Eastern Church. See Hayne, “Thecla and the Church Fathers,” 209.

9. Hayne, “Thecla and the Church Fathers,” 210.

as being “of much fame among virgins.”¹⁰ Among the Cappadocians there never seems to be any doubt as to Thecla’s existence or her role in pointing the way to holiness for women who wanted to serve Christ.

Macrina the Younger was not to be called by the name Thecla. Rather, this secret name was utilized by her brother and biographer, Nyssen, to introduce Macrina and what kind of woman she would become. Only moments before her birth, a visitor revealed to their mother, Emmelia, that Thecla was to be Macrina’s secret name. According to Philip Beagon, “That Macrina should bear this secret name [Thecla] is one indication that Gregory’s account is much more than just a biography of his sister.”¹¹ She was to follow “in the tradition of the great virgin saint.”¹² This virgin saint had, through her life and legend, become a whole new role model for young Christian women. As a result, Nyssen was establishing Macrina (the Younger) as the new Thecla, building upon the legend of the past as well as providing a new model for holiness and complete devotion to God.

10. Nyssen, DVM, §2, quoted in Virginia Woods Callahan, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Gregory of Nyssa Ascetical Works* [FC] (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 164.

11. Philip M. Beagon, “The Cappadocian Fathers, Women and Ecclesiastical Politics” in *Vigiliae Christianae*, no. 49 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 168.

12. Warren J. Smith, “A Just and Reasonable Grief: The Death and Function of a Holy Woman in Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘Life of Macrina’” in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12:1 (2004), 65.



How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

—*Romans 10:14, ESV*

Ordinary Life

The hand came from behind, taking hers unexpectedly. She would have screamed, but the unwelcome hand came attached to a familiar voice.

“Quickly! Run away with me. Marry me before Thamyris makes a fat, comfortable old gossip out of you!”

“Sosi!”

“That’s Sosipater to you, since you won’t marry me.”

Playfully slapping his shoulder with her newly released hand, Thecla gripped her goods tightly with the other. She made her way through the crowded market with her childhood friend, who never stopped trying to talk her out of wedding. It was all in fun, of course, and to no avail. Nothing could make Thecla happier than thoughts of her future with Thamyris.

A crowd had formed, out of which came a funny voice—a strange accent, for sure, but it was undeniably compelling. Sosi did not seem to notice; twice he drew her attention away, but each time she only took a few steps before her curious ears were brought back to that voice.

“Thecla! We’ll be late!” Sosi had lost his playful demeanor. Maybe he wouldn’t marry the prettiest girl in the Lycaonian region, but he had always captured her fascination. No one else knew how to make her smile as broadly. Thecla had always preferred him over the crowd of giggly girls or the young soldiers with

the thick necks and wild eyes. It was one of the few ego boosters in his life. Sosi wasn't accustomed to anyone or anything else taking Thecla away from him, the way his friendship had always had the power to pull her away from others. Reluctantly, he gave in and followed her to investigate the reason for the crowd.

Thecla began pressing into the crowd, not even aware she was doing it. She wanted to see the man with the funny voice and the strange story. There was something magnetic about this man and his words. It was as if each word peeled within her ears. Something mysteriously powerful seized her imagination. Those words about an anointed one—this Christ who was the hero of the strange man's tale—found no objection or opposition in her mind. Her heart was broken by the passion yet also at peace. Contrite and at peace all at once? This was beyond comprehension.

When at last she had found her way to the inside of the huddle, Thecla giggled loudly. Not that she meant to, but it was hard not to find it funny. The booming voice with the strange accent came from a little bald, bow-legged man who might have been taller at some point in his life. The bend in his back—was that natural, or was he hunching over for dramatic effect?

Extraordinary Change

In confident but hushed tones standing near the door, a stately woman whose every gesture exuded easy grace assured an anxious Thamyras that she would handle everything.

“Thank you, Theoclia. I hope you can. You've always been as much a mother to me as my own. I so want this union to happen. If the two people who love her most can't sway her . . .”

“My daughter is brilliant and beautiful, but she is young. I will make sure she sees clearly the most reasonable path to her own happiness and ours.”

Thamyris disappeared into the shadow of the entryway, unconvinced that she would succeed. Theoclia was more optimistic. Her reputation for turning heads was second only to her reputation for turning opinions.

She approached her daughter with that Venusian smile and determined eyes that Thecla knew all too well. Gliding into a reclined position near her daughter, she paused to feign nonchalance before she began to speak.

“Thecla,” Theoclia intoned, “I’m concerned about this cult you’re getting involved with. These people aren’t what you think. They stir up trouble. They get arrested. They’re just . . . just . . . *uncultured atheists*.”

“Please. Please, let your heart hear the heart that loves you most. From credible sources among our honored friends, I’ve heard they’re *cannibals*! Who knows what they do in their secret meetings? Did you ever think maybe that’s why they proselytize so hard? I’m sure they’re just hunting for loads of naïve recruits to satisfy their deranged appetites!”

Thecla restrained a smile and asked in the most inquisitively naïve voice she could muster, “Mother, if followers of the Way were cannibals who ate their own, don’t you think there would be a lot less of them running around?”

“Thecla, I won’t have it. You are a young woman of society, and I raised you to be as delicate as dew in your manner and as rugged as iron in your judgment. There’s a reason this Jesus cult appeals to the slave class.”

“Slaves? Mother, are you completely unaware that our own revered neighbor, Onesiphorus, entertains such cultists? I first heard Paul from my own window. His words carried across the way from our beloved neighbor’s home. Day and night I was captivated by his voice. But it was more than his voice, Mother. It was the

message. If only you could have heard him as I did. His words revealed to my spirit the one God, the source of true and divine love—and more. Mother, did you know there was, not long ago, the most real expression of God's love: more than action or ideal? It was Jesus, who was God among us. Mother, what is the truer statement of love? If I commission a fine pottery in your honor, this is love. If I compose lyric and take the sentiment to song, this is also love. But what would be the greater embodiment of love? Pottery and verse, or myself coming to you in person to be held and seen, spoken with and heard?"

"Thecla! You have been taken in by frauds and thieves! We adore Onesiphorus, truly, but your father and I always knew he was a bit daft. He'd be a poor fool living in the street except for his sake the gods took pity on him and allowed him to be born into a great inheritance that never seems to run out, despite his crazed and reckless generosity."

"From the words wafting through my window, the One God spoke to me and I believed. I trusted. I learned what it is to practice trusting faith and selfless prayer. And even if my mind could—and it hasn't yet—find some argument to counter Paul's wisdom, my spirit is all the more convinced. I have never known joy like this, Mother. And when I heard that voice orating in the street—that voice I had grown to know as well as my own—I had to see him. I had to know that it was the voice of a man and not a spirit. O Mother, if only you had seen him, this funny, little Paul. So clearly, the man was *himself*, but the *spirit* indwelling him was truly the Spirit of God. And I knew then that God, who loved so much to come to us as one of us, had no desire to leave us. And the spirit of God which remained in Paul could remain in us—in me! And that union with God is all I have craved since."

Paul's words were not the only sermon that carried through windows. Outside, where Thamyris had lingered in curious hope, Thecla's words fell like a weight across his shoulders, pressing him to the ground. His face fell into his hands as he wept, "Where is my Thecla?"

Uncommon Virtue: Chastity

Too often we think of chastity as a dutiful, self-imposed exile into loneliness, but Thecla's life embraces chastity in a way that reveals what is gained by a life dedicated to Christ, rather than what is lost. We often speak of conversion as the moment we "ask Jesus to come into our heart and life." Thecla, in contrast, seems to have asked of Jesus if she could come into his heart and his life. This is the picture of the marriage relationship: two become one. She did not confuse solitude with seclusion. Her time alone, in prayer, was quality time with her beloved. Good communication made this relationship strong. Remarkably, the fruit of Thecla's virtue was the conversion of many.

Chastity is also known as temperance, a moral virtue that regulates the allure of our self-satisfying inclinations. By this virtue, the balance provided moderates our use of things. It prevents actions that might be characterized as excessive. It is a counter measure to abuse. Temperance, or chastity, means far more than abstaining from inebriating or addictive substances. Rather, it is an ethical value for living that challenges us not only in how we regard and treat *things* but also how we behave with people. Temperance, as a practical virtue, purifies our relationships. It puts a check on our motives, keeping our intentions and desires honorable. Thecla guides the way for us, showing that our natural appetites can be directed toward what is good and also showing us what it looks like when a person sustains consistent maintenance of their free will.



For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.

—*Titus 2:11–12, ESV*

Questions for Formation

- 1) What was the void in Thecla's life, and in what ways did God re-form it?
- 2) What principles of chastity are helpful and/or needed today?
- 3) Which spiritual disciplines assisted Thecla in honoring God with her life?

Questions for Reflection

- 1) Why do you think Thecla was so effective in making converts to Christianity?
- 2) What can Thecla's relationship with Christ teach us about the marriage relationship?
- 3) What troubles you most about Thecla? What might you ask her?