
Significance Starts With Small

Five Day Devotional

By Sharon Stults

**Five days. Five obscure characters. Five stories of God using
obedience over talent.**

DAY ONE

The Strange Church Lady

Luke 2:36-38

“She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying.” Luke 2:37

What would you think if someone hung out in your church sanctuary in worship and prayer all day every day? Admiration? Skepticism? In Luke’s gospel story we find an elderly woman living obscurely, oddly. At least, it probably seemed that way to some observers. The good doctor’s account winds through Jerusalem’s temple on the day of Jesus’ dedication. There, Anna the prophetess lives. There, she spends her days fasting, praying and worshipping. And there, she encounters the Messiah.

Anna is alone, choosing decades of widowhood after her husband dies. Bucking cultural norms, she chooses to live in God’s house, not with family or friends. Now in her eighties, her decades-long investment in intimate relationship with God is about to pay off hugely.

This is the time in Israel’s history, of the long silence from God. Since Malachi’s prophecies hundreds of years before, God has not spoken broadly to the people he refers to in that book as “the apple of his eye.” The sickly smell of rotten apples invades God’s nostrils. His chosen nation repeatedly presumes upon his declarations of love and thumbs their noses at his warnings of coming judgement.

Now, in Anna’s time, much of Israel exists in despair under the crushing boot of the Roman empire. There’s no national prophetic voice to comfort or guide. The hope for a conquering king, grows dim. Those who desire to know the movements of God’s heart and hands must seek him individually. They must bond tightly with other Jews who’ve maintained their expectant faith, Jews like Anna.

While much of Israel drifts away from God, Anna stays close. She dances over Jewish traditions where women only approach God under the covering of a man.

She speaks directly to God.

In the temple.

Where anyone can see and hear her passionate cries and songs.

Discerning folks probably loved her, and backslidden ones thought her to be rather strange.

Bethlehem's crowds missed the birth of their long-awaited King, from their own ancestral line. How ironic for the Christ child to be overlooked in the city of David, of all things. Nazareth folk dismissed most of Jesus' life and ministry as nonsense while religious Jews in Jerusalem arranged for his public execution. But Anna recognizes Emmanuel, God with us, the moment she lays eyes on him, squirming in his mother's arms. Heavenly royalty disguised as a baby.

Thousands of days filled with small choices that said "Yes," to God's best and "No," to other, good earthly things, culminate in this moment for Anna. God reveals himself in the flesh to her prepared heart because he has big plans for her. She is his first gospel missionary *"She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem" Luke 2:38 NLT.*

Quietly positioned and spiritually in tune, Anna understood the significance of this eternal moment God allowed her to witness. Certain she'd seen the Promised One, she left the temple to spread the news of his coming.

I wonder, would I have recognized Jesus as an infant? Would you? If we had, would we be as bold as Anna?

For further thought:

1. What are some ways God might be calling you to think, speak and behave uniquely from the culture around you?
2. What activities or pursuits has God been nudging you to leave behind to make room for the new things he has for you?
3. Can you think of specific times when you've missed key moments with God in the past?

Prayer

God, thanks for choosing me. Grant me the hearing and discernment to know where I should be positioned and what I am to be doing in that place. Fill me with the courage and tenacity to follow where you lead especially when it's not the same direction others around me are taking.

DAY TWO

The Accidental Hero

“So David did not take the ark home into the city of David but took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite,” 1 Chronicles 13:13.

What happens when an ordinary day becomes extraordinary? Is it possible God might ask *you* to do something unique and new? How would you respond if the Secret Service knocked on your door and asked if they might stash the president at your house for a few months? Starting now. That’s what happened when King David showed up at Obed-Edom’s door with God-in-a-box.

The Ark of the Covenant contained the original ten commandments. Only priests could move it and only on poles looped through gold rings on the corners. No touching. God ordained the ark as a place of meeting and mercy between himself and humans, in the tabernacle.

At first, the Israelites followed God’s directions. Then rebellion took hold and things went akimbo. First, the Philistines, Israel’s enemies, captured the Ark and tried it out as a good luck charm. When their pagan god, Dagon, kept falling on his face and the citizens broke out in tumors, they tried to fob off the scary box to the city of Ekron.

Ekronites didn’t want the box because by now, many Philistines had died. The Bible says their panicked cries reached to heaven. The Philistines then put the Ark on a driver-less cart, pulled by cows and steered the cart to the Israelite city, Beth Shemesh. The Jews excitedly welcomed the Ark of the Covenant back home. Some, too much. After priests safely placed the ark on a rock, regular folk decided to peek inside. God put seventy of them to death.

Beth Shemesh cried out to a nearby settlement of priests at Kiriath-Jiram and said, “Get this thing out of here.” Now, decades later, King David decides it’s time to bring the Ark from Kiriath-Jiram to Jerusalem. His first mistake is to consult men for strategies, but not God.

His second mistake is to plunk the Ark on an oxcart instead of following God’s transport instructions. When the oxen stumble and the Ark teeters, Uzzah reaches out to steady it. God strikes him dead. This is when David and the Ark show up at Obed-Edom’s house.

As a priest himself, Obed-Edom most likely knew the bloody history of the Ark. He also knew that it wasn’t ignorant pagans who tried to move the Ark this time. He understood everything represented in that moment when a king stood humbly at his door requesting storage room for God’s presence.

Would I be ready for a moment like that? Would you? We are all considered priests in the new covenant. Do we know how to welcome and care for the presence of God, especially when he shows up in dramatic ways unexpectedly? Obed-Edom did. An ordinary priest from a lesser town, he stepped courageously into an extraordinary situation.

Obviously, God approved of the humble priest’s care of the Ark. *“And the ark of God remained with the household of Obed-edom in his house three months. And the LORD blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that he had,” 1 Chronicles 13:14.*

After those three months, Obed-Edom didn't rest on his laurels and retire from active priest life. He moved to Jerusalem and served as a doorkeeper and worship leader in the temple. (1Chronicles 15:21-24) Definitely a promotion but a much busier life than if he'd stayed home and simply lived off the blessings of those three months. Like some might be tempted to do.

Why did God lead David to Obed-Edom's house? He knew that inside the home, lived the character and courage needed for this assignment. I doubt anyone else beyond Obed-Edom's closest friends and family knew about the depth of this man. Maybe they didn't even know.

What trials and circumstances occurred prior to this event that created this kind of calm response to an uncommon situation? We don't know, but God did. He also knew that he could trust this man to handle his presence rightly, reverently.

God allows trials and challenges to prepare us for moments like these. Quietly but methodically, he seeks to prepare us for crisis and watershed seasons. While others shrink away, God can enable us to step up. These opportunities not only bless us but bring goodness to others. Obed-Edom lived a quiet, unknown-to most life in a nondescript town. Then suddenly...

Are you ready for a "suddenly" in your life?

Questions to ponder:

1. How do you think you might react if something as serious and unexpected as what occurred for Obed-Edom happened to you? What do you think that reveals about you?
2. What specific steps can you take to welcome more of God's presence into your life? Hint: Psalm 22:3
3. Can you describe a time when you experienced God's presence in a special way?

Prayer

God forgive me for any time I've not welcomed or recognized your presence. Help me to continue to see the challenges and trials I face as preparation for future assignments. God, I'm ready, willing, and available.

DAY THREE

The Cowardly Captain

“Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.” Judges 6:15

“I’m too old to.....”

“I don’t know how to.....”

“I’m not very good at....”

“There’s probably someone else who’d be better than me for this...”

Ever caught yourself responding to God like this? These are some of my excuses I’ve tossed up when he nudges my comfort zones.

When God sends an angel to Gideon, the messenger finds the man cowering from his enemies. Gideon is covertly threshing wheat in a winepress trying to hide it from the Midianites, when the angel appears. His shocked response, in Judges 6:15, is reminiscent of some of my better excuses, listed above.

At this time, Israel is trapped in another cycle of rebellion and God’s discipline. Their return to idolatry prompts God to send the Midianites and their allies, to execute judgement. Israel is sacrificing their best crops and livestock to Baal instead of God. In return, God sends the Midianite horde to plunder Israel repeatedly, leaving them without food and forcing them to flee to caves for survival. The Midianites are a terrifying nomadic force due to their numbers and mobility. *“For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in” Judges 6:5.*

Gideon is covertly threshing wheat in a winepress trying to hide it from the Midianites, when the angel of the Lord appears and delivers God’s assignment for him. His shocked, yet factual response, reminds me of some of my answers to God’s calls.

The Bible shows us repeatedly, that God uses the obedient more than the talented. By men’s standards, Gideon was all wrong on paper. This obscure nobody as a military captain and spiritual leader?

- Born into the least important tribe. No social standing or influence (Judges 6:15)
- Not the firstborn. Disrespected by his own family (Judges 6:15,27)
- Father leads Baal worship (Judges 6:25-32)
- Lacks confidence and courage (Judges 6:27)
- Struggles with decision making and obedience (Judges 6:36-40)

Does this sound like a description of a leader soldiers will follow into battle? Gideon stretched God’s patience, but he did get past himself and start to obey, with astounding results. He led three hundred courageous men who roused the numberless Midianites and saved Israel from destruction. Read the full story in Judges 6-8 to see Gideon’s amazing makeover from cowardly wheat thresher to mighty warrior.

God's earthly kingdom is littered with almost-Gideons. I know. I've been one. God asks me to do something outrageous, beyond my natural capabilities and I say, "No, that can't be God's voice. That sounds crazy." Crazy than picking an army based on how they drink water? Crazy than defeating an enemy too numerous to count with some shouting and lanterns?

What if Gideon never moved past his own inadequacies? Was he the only man in Israel with close-to-enough obedience for God to use? Maybe without Gideon, Israel doesn't survive at that time? Don't be an almost-Gideon. The next time God calls, focus on him instead of you. Ask him to be strong where you are weak and to guide and train you in the ways you should go. Who knows what adventures are waiting for those who are obscure, underqualified, but fiercely obedient?

Questions:

1. Has God ever knocked at your door with an outrageous plan? What is it?
2. What are the areas of your life where you need to shift your focus from your weakness to God's abilities?
3. What kind of skills, strengths and provisions do you need God to supply, to enable you to do what he's asked of you?

Prayer

God, forgive me for when I've made excuses instead of obeying. Show me the works you've designed for me. Empower me with the faith to believe that where you lead, you will also provide. Make me bold and powerful enough to see things all the way through, just as you did for Gideon.

DAY FOUR

The Pushy Mother

But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Matthew 15:25-27 ESV

Have you ever prayed out of sheer desperation? Do you feel discouraged that your prayers don't seem to be moving God's hand over your situation? Does it seem like God is moving in other people's lives while your prayers hit the ceiling and dribble down the walls?

Sheer desperation drove a Canaanite woman to chase down the off-limits-to-her Jewish teacher, rumored to possess powers. With a demonized daughter trailing behind, I think she figured that whatever happened, it couldn't be worse than her daily life. Did the child scream and rant? Did she try to jump off cliffs? We don't know. What we do know, is that this mother was desperate.

The timing and geography of this incident are key. First, this is the first recorded time Jesus ventured out of Jewish territory. Approaching the end of his life, he needed quiet time with the disciples.

Quiet, away from murderous religious leaders.

Quiet, to explain to his dear friends the details of his approaching death.

He knew the impossibility of this near his own people, so he traveled into Gentile country. Enter noisy, pushy Canaanite mother.

She follows Jesus, crying out for healing for her daughter. At first, he ignores her. The disciples are disturbed. They beg Jesus to send her away. Maybe tried to shush and shove her. None of that stopped her. Finally, Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel," (Matt. 15:24). Sorry, members only.

That type of verbal barrier stops most people. But Jesus' apparent rebuff didn't hold back this tormented mother. She maneuvers herself in front of Jesus' feet and pleads simply, "Lord, help me." What made her keep going despite the disciple's ill winds against her and Jesus' seeming indifference? I believe she gambled on a seed of faith she didn't fully understand.

Jesus' reply to her tiny belief seems cruel in modern translation. "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," (Matt. 15:26). The word he uses for dog though, is Greek for a beloved family pet. Imagine Jesus' gentle tone as he pushed this woman harder in her fledgling faith. She stayed put, and with her handicapped understanding, responded boldly. My translation? "I'm not entirely clear who you are but I know power and love when I see it. I don't need to eat at the table. A falling crumb will heal my daughter." And it did.

Not only did Jesus roust the demons in her daughter, he praised this mother for her "great faith." Why did Jesus lavish such a compliment, one he used rarely? I believe he watched her faith rapidly transition in a short time. When the woman first approached Jesus, she called him, "Son of David." This was a political term that looked at him only in terms of his earthly power and authority. She sought a favor from a powerful man.

When the woman finally falls at Jesus feet, she calls him “Lord.” As Jesus delayed his healing and forced her to keep chasing him, she began to recognize the divine in him. William Barclay, Bible commentator says, “He wanted her to see that a request to a great man must be turned into a prayer to the living God.”

God honors this woman with a spot in the gospels because he saw qualities in her he craves in all his children.

1. Faith that believes Jesus is who he says he is.
2. Faith that believes he is the answer to life’s problems.
3. Faith that persists in prayer even when Heaven seems silent.
4. Humility that cares more about chasing Jesus than how we look doing that.

Satan works to convince you that your prayers are ineffective. He attempts to deceive you into thinking you are ignored by heaven and unimportant on earth. That’s how the disciples viewed the Canaanite mother. Who was this nobody to approach Jesus with a large request?

Jesus saw her entirely differently. “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire,” (Matt. 15:28). Could it be that the “nobodies” of this world are the ones moving heaven and earth through their persistent prayers?

Who are you when you approach Jesus?

Questions to ponder:

1. Which of your prayer requests right now require persistence?
2. What do you think God might be working in and out of you while you wait for him to move in your situation?

Prayer

God forgive me for the times I’ve given up on situations and people when you wanted me to persist in prayer. Grow in me the kind of faith that doesn’t quit when life becomes hard and circumstances remain unchanged. Give me the kind of boldness that makes requests of you for things beyond what I can ask or imagine.

DAY FIVE

The Passionate Prophet

“The pride of your heart has deceived you...” Obadiah 3

How do you handle delivering rotten news? What do you do when life delegates you to be the one who:

hands out the pink slips

delivers the grim diagnosis

Cancels the special event

confronts someone ensnared by sin

No person of grace enjoys bearing bad news but that’s what God called the prophet, Obadiah, to do. Worse yet, unlike other ancient prophets, God asked him to preach it to his enemies, the Edomites. These savage descendants of Esau carried a heritage of bitterness over Esau’s stolen birthright, from generation to generation. When Israel fled Egypt, Edom blocked passage to the promised land. When Babylon invaded Jerusalem, the Edomites cheered them on and cut off roads of escape to the Israelites. Remember, the Israelites, descendants of Jacob, were Edom’s cousins, and yet they showed no mercy.

The ruthless Edomites knew about God and his ways but decided they could never be invaded and conquered like their foolish Israelite cousins. They built better, stronger homes and fortresses in rocky cliffs. They boasted about their superiority and safety. And their arrogance and cruelty toward Israel, provoked God to annihilate Edom as a nation.

Obadiah, the mysterious prophet with unknown origins, delivered his entire message in 21 precise verses. No wasted words and certainly none about his heritage or background. A remarkable man called up for a critical task, who completed his assignment without taking any bows. We can imply a lot about Obadiah’s character and skills through those 21 verses.

- He believed the message mattered more than the messenger
- He demonstrated outstanding courage delivering devastating words to dangerous people
- He lived out the meaning of his name, “Servant of God”
- He showed compassion for Edom by delivering the message in poetry form so it might be easier for them to remember
- He clearly possessed some mad writing skills, delivering a word of judgement in a 21-verse poem

Obadiah is an outstanding Old Testament example of New Testament behavior God expects from children of the new covenant:

1. **Speak the truth in love.**

(Ephesians 4:15) Truth telling can be a painful thing. We can soften the pain of our listener by bracketing it with mercy.

2. Confront sin courageously

Allowing someone to sin unchecked is cowardly and shows a disregard for their soul. (Luke 17:3, Galatians 2:11-13, Galatians 6:1)

3. Endure hardships as a servant of God.

We shouldn't be surprised when God asks us to do difficult, painful tasks.
(2 Corinthians 6:4 1 Corinthians 3:9)

Obadiah's role in history from earth's view, seems small, a nobody prophet urging a tiny, rebellious nation to repent. From heaven's perspective, he played a hero's role. God created hell for Satan, not humans. The Father adores mankind and wants to spend eternity with us. Before people Edomites chose hell for eternity, he asked Obadiah to present them with one last opportunity to choose heaven instead.

If God asks, are you willing to be moved from the shadows into center stage? If he asked you to share his message of redemption in a hostile place, could you say yes? And could you do all that with very few people lauding your sacrifices? This lost world, hurrying itself to hell, needs more Obadiah's.

Questions:

1. List the lost people in your life whom you interact with regularly. What kinds of thoughts or emotions are stirred in you when you consider their current eternal destiny?

2. *"But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of their sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood."* Ezekiel 33:6. Who do you think the watchmen are in this chapter? In your own words, describe their responsibility.

3. Is God prompting you to share his message with someone? Who? What strategies could you use, like Obadiah used poetry, to make the message easier for that person to understand?

Prayer

God, I don't want to see anyone I know spend eternity separated from you. Help me to discern where you are working and stirring so I know how to pray and speak and when to be silent. Show me ways I can demonstrate your love to the lost people around me in ways that will draw them near to you.