

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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God makes pebbles powerful

God does surprising things. For crucial roles God often chooses people who to others (and maybe to themselves) seem totally unqualified. But God can make even our tiniest abilities and our feeblest weapons powerful when we put them at God's disposal.

That's what happened with David. When Goliath, the heavily armored Philistine giant, was terrorizing the Israelites, no one but God would have ever chosen David to confront him.



David just happened to be on the battlefield delivering a snack from his father to his older brothers. They and the other Israelite soldiers had been hearing Goliath's threats for days without having the nerve to respond, but as soon as David heard one of Goliath's daily threats he paid attention.

When the Philistine [Goliath] looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth... But David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts ... the battle is the Lord's..."

... David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone...

1 Samuel 17:42, 45, 50

Unlike everyone else, when David saw the problem he did what he could to try to remedy it. And to the soldiers' amazement, what he did worked. His weapon was a mere pebble, but his skill and experience had shown him how to use a pebble effectively, and he was obeying God's call. That made all the difference.

What's your pebble? Maybe it's the ability to

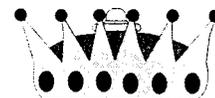
read, which you could use to combat the giant problem of illiteracy. Maybe it's access to leaders who are part of a giant bureaucracy that hinders needed change in your church or your city. Maybe it's the willingness to ask giant questions that no one else dares to ask openly. Whatever your pebble may be, if you'll put it at God's disposal it can be powerful.

A unique opportunity

Esther wasn't the kind of person you would expect to accomplish anything momentous. She was a woman in a culture that hardly considered women people, and she was a Jew in a nation whose rulers were trying to destroy the Jews. As if these handicaps weren't enough, she was also young and she was an orphan.

Esther was beautiful, however, and the king collected beautiful women, so he brought Esther to live in the palace. Then when he got mad at his wife he made Esther queen. This put her in a very strategic position.

Esther's uncle Mordecai had managed to keep her informed about the plight of her people, and he urged her to use her influence with the king to save them. But Esther knew that anyone who went uninvited into the king's presence would be killed, so of course she hesitated to approach him on behalf of the Jews.



Then she realized that doing God's will was more important than obeying the king's rules and protecting herself. And she realized that no one else had the access to the king that she had. So she did what she could, and it worked because God wanted it done.

Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "...If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal position for just such a time as this."

Then Esther said... "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

Esther 4:13-16

God's long-range aims would have eventually been accomplished even if Esther hadn't helped, but the particular people whom Esther had the opportunity to rescue would have been lost.

Who do you have access to that others don't? Maybe God wants you to risk speaking to him or her, to minister to her/his needs or to urge needed changes in your church, workplace, city, or nation.

Clues we can use



David's and Esther's stories contain clues that show us what we may need to do in order to respond to God's call.

▪ Notice what's really happening

Both David and Esther observed how "the system" functioned, who had the power in it, and where its vulnerable spots were, and they made good use of what they observed.

▪ Use a method that fits your abilities

David rejected Saul's loan of armor because it didn't fit him. Instead, he used his own talent and the slingshot he was skilled at using. Esther didn't become part of the king's official group of advisors. She used her own way of getting the king's ear.

▪ Be unconventional if necessary

To do God's will both David and Esther had to use unconventional methods and ignore some official policies and rules. Countless other God-inspired men and women throughout the Bible and Christian history have done the same thing. God doesn't seem to give much importance to following the world's (or the church's!) standard operating procedures.



▪ Don't take no for an answer

David and Esther refused to be deterred by powerful people who told them they were breaking unbreakable rules, they were going where they had no right to go, and they couldn't possibly succeed.

▪ Don't let being a nobody deter you

David and Esther were nobodies by the world's standards. We don't have to be recognized as powerful, prominent, or even capable by the people around us in order to do what God wants done.

▪ Use your unique opportunities

Both David and Esther "just happened" to find themselves in unique positions that gave them the opportunity to help solve a problem that urgently needed solving. Did God put David and Esther in those positions? Or did God choose them because they were already there? Either way, it worked.

▪ Dare to risk failure, even if the cost is high

David and Esther were attentive to God's will and willing to respond. They took action even though

failure could bring death and on the basis of past experience the probability of success was small.



▪ Accept your new role

David and Esther acknowledged their new God-given roles. Even before David got King Saul's permission to take on Goliath, he said that he "used to" keep sheep. Although to all appearances he was still a shepherd, he already recognized that occupation as belonging only to his past.

▪ Don't expect perfection

David's motives weren't pure, as ours aren't. The riches, princess, and freedom that were the reward for killing Goliath were big attractions for him. His actions weren't all admirable, either. But this didn't keep him from being able to do important things that God wanted done. Fortunately God doesn't require people to be perfect in order to do God's will.

I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the Lord of hosts!" ...

[The angel said], "Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah 6:5,7-8

Divine taps on the shoulder



In his book *Turning Points*, Max L. Christensen writes about people who responded to what he calls "divine taps on the shoulder." "These stirrings of the soul," Christensen notices, "come in every time and place and form, in every race and culture, and at every level of human experience." He observes, "They occur in calmly reasoned acts of will and in instant reactions to fear and hysteria..."

The people Christensen writes about had resources that weren't much different from yours or mine, but they used those resources—their pebbles—to do what they saw needed doing. "In moments combining crisis and insight," Christensen points out, they "found the grace and strength to change our world for the better, forever."

- ♦ When a depressed alcoholic cried out to God in desperation, God led him to start Alcoholics Anonymous.



- ◆ When a Methodist lay preacher saw that London's poor people felt unwanted by church congregations, he began the Salvation Army.
- ◆ When a postal clerk saw the pileup of Christmas mail, he thought of sick children and created Christmas stamps to raise funds to combat tuberculosis.
- ◆ When a clergyman saw a 15-year-old girl commit suicide, he enlisted volunteers and set up the first suicide hot line.
- ◆ When a nurse saw a bleeding woman in a New York City tenement, she started the first program of visiting nurses for the poor.
- ◆ When a Wisconsin boy looked at the unspoiled forest near his family's farm, he



started the work that eventually led to establishing our nation's system of national parks and national forests.

Awareness is the first step

In recent months I've seen many Christians become aware of giant problems in our society and use their pebbles to help overcome those giants.

- ◆ When a group of Christian medical personnel in my city saw how urgently poor people needed medical care, they started a free clinic.
- ◆ When a retired army officer in Texas saw churches failing to minister to the poor, he single-handedly started an inner-city ministry.

I've also seen how the anger, pain, or grief that comes from personal disappointments or disasters can become the stimulus for putting pebbles to use.

- ◆ When a high-school valedictorian could not afford to attend college, she resolved to help other students avoid such disappointment. When her future husband had a similar struggle, he made a similar resolve. When they became able many years later, they endowed numerous scholarships. I'm especially aware of their story. They were my parents.
- ◆ When I had a mastectomy and reconstructive surgery a few years ago, I saw how by revealing my experience, my feelings, and my scars I could help other women face the fear and disfigurement that breast cancer brings.

You've undoubtedly seen similar situations, and you may be already actively pursuing a ministry to which God has called you.

If not, what might your ministry be? What resources do you have? What anger, mistreatment, or pain have you experienced, that you could use to help others avoid or cope with similar suffering?

A reader's reflections



A layman who has just discovered *Connections* read all the issues at once. "I devoured your newsletters," he says. "I kept saying, 'This is what I want to say.'"

He includes his own reflections. "What is the purpose of the church anyhow? Why are we so angry about the wrong things—pensions, budgets, appointments, sexuality? ... The church established by Jesus of Nazareth bears scant resemblance to today's church." He puts it in a nutshell: "Jesus' style of ministry is lay oriented and is aimed outward. It is not aimed inward at the pension fund, apportionments, appointments, committee meetings, pipe organs, or cut flowers."

This layman writes, "I do not recall once being asked by my congregation to give an accounting of my discipleship in the dailyness of my life—riding the bus, standing in a line at a voting booth, shopping for groceries, leading a meeting of coworkers, or visiting my neighbor ... I have, however,



been challenged repeatedly with 'Why weren't you at choir practice Thursday?'" and other pleas for accountability *within* the congregation. He thinks the real evidence of change "will be the day the church receives a gospel challenge from the council of the laity instead of a Pastoral Episcopal Initiative from the Council of Bishops."



The August issue of *Connections* will deal with the everyday world of work, leisure, and personal relationships, the main arena of lay Christians' ministry. I'll include some ideas from a couple of recent books on this topic. If you haven't already read them you might like to read them this summer. One is *The Monday Connection*, by Lutheran layman William Diehl, a former top executive of Bethlehem Steel Co. The other is *The Active Life*, by Parker J. Palmer, a Quaker.

- If you are dissatisfied with what your church is doing, why not start the kind of ministry you think it lacks?
- If you see people who lack food, clothing, shelter, education, medical care, or other necessities, why not help provide them?
- If you are lonely or discouraged, why not start a group to provide the kind of Christian companionship and support you yearn for?
- If you have an ability or an interest that you aren't using, why not search for ways in which you could put it to use?

You have at least one pebble that God wants you to use. With God's help your pebble, like David's, may overcome a giant. Maybe like Esther you have come to your present position for just such a time as this.

Barbara

Next month . . .

The ministry of lay Christians—
God's partners at work in the world



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A pebble can be powerful . . .

Personality types and the church—an introvert's response to the June issue of *Connections*

A laywoman writes, "People in the more common types just don't see the problem... Extroverts have a very difficult time understanding that what seems a very timid step to them may be an act of bravery for an introvert."

"To be extroverted," she observes, "means to *gain* energy from being with other people, while to be introverted means to have one's energy *diminished* by being with other people. Given the nature of the church, I suspect many introverts elect to stay away. Church programs so often seem to focus on socializing... Leadership roles in churches require constant motivation of members, and great amounts of energy devoted to 'rallying the troops.' Introverts feel unequipped for these roles and, if persuaded to enter them, often feel that they let everyone down..."

"I don't think these observations in any way contradict the fact that the Holy Spirit can be present in any endeavor," this *Connections* reader writes, "and can give introverts the courage to lead or extroverts the courage to go on silent retreats. I do feel that more attention should be paid to sounding calls for introverts and offering challenges and support for their special gifts..."