

THE RAMEN NOODLE REVIVAL

In my freshman year of college I saw the power of ordinary acts of obedience revealed...in my dorm. I attended a small Baptist college in South Carolina, where I ended up rooming with Jody—the same guy who had led me to Christ when I was sixteen. He also ended up becoming my brother-in-law. (I'm telling you, nothing just happens. When God superintends your decisions, ordinary events are connected in extraordinary ways.)

Jody and I were in an interesting position because the college decided to house us in the athletic dorm, on the third floor, with half the football team. What made it more interesting was the discovery that we were the only guys who claimed to be followers of Christ on the hall. And the only white boys to boot. And oh, the only ones who didn't play football. Do you remember this *Sesame Street* song?

One of these things is not like the others,
One of these things just doesn't belong.

The first few months of my freshman year felt a lot like that. I certainly didn't resent being one of the only two white guys on the hall. I kind of relished it. After all, I had been the only

white kid in the black gospel choir during my senior year of high school. So I was used to glowing in the dark. The value of diversity is in my DNA. Still, I was having a hard time finding common ground with these guys.

I had a passion to see them give their lives to Christ, but nothing in my win-people-to-Jesus playbook was working. I invited them to church, Bible study, and prayer meeting. But North Greenville University already required us to attend chapel two times a week. By the time Sunday rolled around, these gentlemen were all churched out. Plus, I was starting to sense that more awareness of the gospel wasn't the answer. They'd heard it all before. What they needed was a demonstration.

One night I had a revelation. It was a lot like the classic line in one of the classic movies of my childhood, starring one of the worst actors in American cinematography. You remember the recurring voice in *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, he will come"? Well, I heard a voice kind of like that. Only it wasn't out loud, and the message was slightly different: *If you feed them, they will come.*

This was my freshman-year burning bush. I was going to feed these fellows into the kingdom of God.

I immediately got in my Toyota Tercel and hit the closest grocery store, which was twenty minutes away. (Our school really was in the middle of nowhere.) I filled the cart with groceries and almost emptied my bank account to pay for them. It was good stuff too—Little Debbie. Oatmeal Creme Pies. Honey Buns. Nutty Buddy Bars. And of course the nutritional staple of higher education: ramen noodles. Only the best for the cause of Christ. About a hundred bucks in groceries. That's a fortune for a college student.

I hustled back up to the third floor, cleared out the top of my closet, and stocked it like a pantry. Then I went door to door, only this time, instead of inviting the guys to church, I invited them back to my room. To eat my food. My new and improved pitch went something like this: “God put it on my heart to start giving away my food to anybody who wants it, anytime you need it. I’m in room 318, so anytime you’re hungry, just stop by the room. I’ll even leave the door unlocked. No strings attached.”

My initiative was successful. Too successful. By the time I had knocked on every door on the hall and turned around to head back, I had a train of large African American football players following me back to the room to take me up on my offer. Within five minutes flat, they had cleaned me out. One hundred bucks in groceries gone. Just like that.

Jody turned to me and said with classic country-boy twang, “Well, that was real slick of ya. What you gonna do now, food pantry man?”

To tell you the truth, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I knew what I wasn’t going to do: quit. I refused to give up that easily. I may have been a broke college student, but since God is loaded, I pressed on with the food ministry. And the Lord provided. Somehow, I always had enough food to give away. It wasn’t five thousand men, five loaves, and two fish, but it was the closest thing to a multiplication miracle I’d ever experienced. The guys would regularly stop by the room to pick up some food, and some of them even asked me to pray for them.

But nothing extraordinary was happening. No one was repenting of sin, trusting Jesus, or even making obvious spiritual progress. So a few months in, hundreds of dollars and many processed foods later, I felt like maybe this bright idea had run its

course. I had a conversation with God, explaining, *Lord, this is expensive. These cats are eating my food, but no one is getting saved. I really need someone to pray the sinner's prayer and give me a reason to keep this thing going. Otherwise, I'm going to shut this little food pantry down. Amen?*

A few nights later, just as Jody and I were falling asleep, someone knocked at the door. Honestly, my first reaction wasn't audacity. It was more like animosity. *It's almost midnight. Is someone really knocking at my door to ask for food at midnight?*

But this guy didn't want food. He wanted to talk about Jesus.

I was really shocked because, in some ways, he was the hardest, most resistant one on the hall. We called him D. And I would have voted him least likely to receive Jesus. Good thing God doesn't poll me for election purposes.

D sat down on our bean bag and opened up with this line: "Ya'll are crazy."

Thanks, man. Anything else?

"I mean, I've been at this school for three years now. Everybody has tried to tell me I need Jesus. But nobody has ever just given me their food. Ya'll are crazy. And being around ya'll crazy white boys, I'm starting to see it. I need God in my life."

If the idea to start the food pantry was my burning bush, this was my Mount Sinai. I closed in for the kill: "Okay, let's do this. You can give your life to Christ right here, right now."

D didn't accept my proposal.

"Naw, naw, man. I wanna do it the right way. In church this Sunday."

I broke it down theologically: "The church isn't a building or a program. The church is God's people. We're here; we're the church. Let's do this right now."

D didn't budge.

"I want to do it in church. The right way."

One more try. "What do you need, D? You need me to print a bulletin? Sing a song? Take an offering? Let's do this!"

D still wasn't feeling me. And he was bigger than I was.

So off to church we went that Sunday. Me, D, and three of the other football players. All packed into my Toyota Tercel. Even if I had to Fred Flintstone that thing up the hill, we were going to get there. D picked the church, and of course he chose a church where I'd be the only white face in the crowd, clapping off rhythm. Cool with me. I was used to that.

That day, during the invitation, D made his move. He walked the aisle, bowed his knee, and asked Jesus to come into his life. And all his friends were watching.

His change was sudden and dramatic. He started reading his Bible incessantly. In fact, his roommate was a little upset. He grilled me: "Steve, what have you done to my boy? He don't wanna go to the club or nothing. Just wanna sit around and read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John...Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John."

Before long, that roommate gave his life to Christ too. Followed by one of the guys across the hall. Now the flywheel was spinning, and revival had begun. I became a hall chaplain of sorts. The guys would bring their non-Christian friends to me and say stuff like, "Yo, Steve, you better tell Anton he goin' to hell..."

So I told Anton he was going to hell, and Anton received Jesus. And the momentum continued. Over the course of that year, Jody and I saw almost a dozen of those guys give their lives to Christ. We personally disciplined several of them. In the South, we'd call this a gullywashing, toad-strangling revival. You can call

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it whatever you want, but by any definition, it was a move of God. I even ran into one of those hell-raisers at a youth crusade I was speaking at a couple of years later. I asked him what he was doing there. He told me he was a youth pastor.