

LITTLE THINGS IN A DAY OF BIGNESS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on August 2, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

History records that men in every age had a tendency to minimize the worth of small things. It is the elephant which gets the attention, not the mouse. From the tower of Babel to the Pyramids, from the Colossus of Rhodes to the modern skyscraper, bigness has captured the attention and the hearts of men. I have in my library a book entitled *Guinness' Book of World Records*. It has more than 450 pages dealing with the "highest, fastest, newest, loudest, greatest, strongest, biggest," things on earth. Only a small portion of this book deals with small objects and organisms. In general it deals with bigness.

The importance of small things was shown in the Apollo XIII flight a few months ago. After the years and months of preparation, the launch was apparently perfect. As the three astronauts sped on their way to another landing on the moon everything seemed to be going extremely well, when a near tragedy occurred. Suddenly the successful flight became a nightmare. The whole world watched and prayed through several agonizing days as all the skill and resources of modern science were used in bringing the men back safely to the earth. A careful study of the spaceship was made and eventually it was announced that tucked away in the maze of gadgets and sophisticated electronic equipment there was a tiny component--an electrical switch--which had been defective. It had turned a successful flight into a near tragedy, even though in itself it was so small that it could easily have been held between the thumb and forefinger of the hand.

On another voyage of discovery, a few bits of seaweed and driftwood played a very important role. When Columbus and his men had been away from Spain and Portugal for many weeks, the faith of the crew was overcome by the fear of the unknown. Mutiny was ready to explode. A few bits of seaweed and driftwood, floating on the waves, enabled Columbus to stay the mutiny of his sailors and to continue his voyage on to the discovery of the new world. Had these tiny objects not appeared, he would have been unable to convince his crew that land was near.

The invention of clocks and watches came as a result of a small, unexpectedly important incident. A caretaker left a lighted lamp swinging from the high ceiling in the Cathedral at Pisa, in northern Italy. To most people this event was of no special significance, but to a boy who was later to be known in history as Galileo there was something very significant, The steady swaying motion of the lamp conveyed to his inventive mind the idea of a pendulum by means of which he could measure time. Clocks, with the pendulum movement, began to measure the passage of time. Until this event, the sundial had been man's only means of calculating the time of day.

Julia Fletcher Carney gave us the poem,

Little drops of water, little grains of sand,
Make the mighty ocean and the pleasant land;
So the little moments, humble though they be,
Make the mighty ages of eternity.

The famed Helen Keller, who achieved worldwide distinction because of her overcoming of both blindness and deafness, has written, "The million little things that drop into our hands, the small opportunities each day brings. He leaves us free to use or abuse and goes unchanging along His silent way."

For some time I have wanted to present a message on the importance of small things. As I have considered this theme, I have thought of the possibility of using Proverbs 6:6 as my text, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise." Another passage that could serve as text for this theme is found in Prov. 30:24-28, which reads, "There are four things which are little upon the earth, but they are exceeding wise: the ants are a people not strong, yet they provide their food in summer; the coneys are but a feeble folk, yet make they their houses in the rocks; the locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands; the lizard taketh hold with her hands, yet is she in king's palaces." All of these verses suggest that man, talented and sophisticated though he may be, can learn from the humble creatures of the earth,

Still another possibility for the text is Zechariah 4:10, a passage in which God asks, "For who hath despised the day of small things?" Yet it is a few verses above this scripture that I found what I believe to be the essence of the message which I have in mind. In Zech. 4:6, God has said, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith Jehovah of hosts." This it is! In a day when power, size and numbers seem to determine the outcome of everything, it is good for us to remember that ultimately it is not by might, nor power, but by the Spirit of God that basic issues will be decided.

There are passages also in the New Testament which indicate the importance of small things. For example, in speaking of the old Mosaic Law Jesus said, "Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished." (Matt. 5:18). The jot was the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, similar to our English letter i. The tittle was a small horn or point added to a letter that changed its meaning. Christ's point was that even the most minute details of God's law were to be given full respect. A little later in the same message Jesus added, "Behold the birds of the heaven, that they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not ye of much more value than they? ... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." (Matt. 6:26, 28, 29). God is concerned even about the birds of the air and the flowers that grow upon the earth.

A Day of Bigness

Ours is a day of bigness. Crowds of people are everywhere. It is not unusual for a football crowd to number as many as 100,000 spectators. Basketball crowds now commonly number ten to twelve thousand people, and on a special occasion in the Astrodome as many as 52,000 watched a single game. Yet these numbers, impressive as they are, are nothing compared to the thirty or forty or fifty million that sometimes watch a sporting event or some specially important happenings by means of television.

In our day governments are bigger, with multiplied billions of expenditures. Cities are bigger, as they spread out over the surrounding countryside. Expressways make it possible for commuters to travel twenty and thirty miles to and from work without undue investment of time. Buildings are bigger. Business is bigger, with more than eight million cars and trucks produced in a single year, with twelve to fifteen million shares traded on the New York Stock Exchange in a normal day. Along with these ever-increasing aspects of modern life, we must also recognize that our problems are bigger.

As the United States population grows past the two hundred million mark, and shows no evidence of slowing down, and as the world population reaches the three and one-half billion mark, an individual is likely to feel: "I am not important." Lost in a sea of faces, living on a street of look-a-like houses, and working at a desk like all the others, man feels his own insignificance.

It is in this situation that man might well say, "What I do that is good will not mean much. What I do that is evil will not be noticed." But if a man tends to feel himself insignificant amid all of the other people on earth, and if he begins to feel that his behavior is unimportant, he needs to look again. When he feels that the good he does is not of much value, he needs to remember that it was one man, Noah, who saved the human race from extinction in the flood. He needs to remember that if there had been ten righteous men in the city Sodom would have been spared. When he is tempted to feel that evil behavior will not be noticed, he needs to remember that Adam and Eve placed a low estimate on disobedience to God, and as a result the whole human race has suffered in a thousand ways ever since. The fact is that God's system is based entirely upon individual behavior. His concern is with every man in an individual, personal way. God blesses and punishes not on the basis of nations, races, or even families, but on the basis of man's own individual thoughts and acts.

God Uses Small Things

Some time ago I read an article in which it was pointed out that the average human body is made up of more than one trillion individual cells. The author went on to say that each one of these tiny cells, so small that only high powered microscopes can reveal it, contains forty-six pairs of chromosomes and that attached to each of these are the genes. He then staggered my imagination by saying that each may contain as many as thirty thousand determiners. It is in the genes that such major matters as the color of one's skin, physical proportions, and even the degree of one's intelligence are determined. How vitally important in the total pattern of our lives these sub-microscopic entities are.

Turning to an entirely different area, when God sent Samuel to anoint a new king he sent him to the house of Jesse the Bethlehemite. The oldest sons passed before Samuel--Eliab, Abinadab, Shinrmh--until all seven had been considered and rejected. The reason given in the scriptures is simply "Jehovah seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but Jehovah looketh on the heart." (I Sam. 15:7). Here is the crux of the whole matter. God sees the inward, spiritual man, whereas we human beings see only the externals. We are enamored of bigness, while God is concerned with goodness. At that point in the story Samuel asked, "Are here all of thy children?" To which Jesse replied, "There remaineth yet the youngest." (I Sam. 16:11). David was brought in, chosen by Jehovah, and started up the road that led to his eventual achieving of the title "greatest king of Israel."

When Christ chose his apostles they were only ordinary men. In Acts 4:13 the rulers at Jerusalem spoke of them as "unlearned and ignorant men." Yet, they became the great apostles who served as the crew to launch the Lord's church among men .

Conclusion

God, who watches over the birds of the heavens and the flowers of the fields, knows and cares for each individual. He even knows the number of hairs upon our heads. He is concerned for our bodies, our minds, and especially for our souls. Even in a day of bigness God is more concerned over one soul than over material world.

The biggest decision of a person's life is that which leads him to stand with Christ. We have just a few years at most and we need to let those years count fully for our Lord. We are important in God's sight. Your eternal destiny is important enough that Christ came to the world and died that you might have eternal life in heaven. Do not discard as unimportant that which bears the image of God, that for which Christ died. Come to him now, obeying his commandments, so that he may cleanse you of your sins and add you to his eternal family, the church.

How short the distance between life and death! Actually, even in robust health we are only a heartbeat away from death. So little a thing as a heartbeat separates those who are alive and those who are dead. David, fleeing from Saul, said, "There is but a step between me and death." (I Sam. 20:3). It is for this reason that we need urgently to live our lives as God wants them lived. It is for this reason that we need to be Christians. Not only is it the happiest and most rewarding life here on earth, but it is the only life that will prepare us for the eternity to come.