

BIG DEAL

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.

He was a BIG man or so he thought, a BIG shot. And his goal in life was to get BIGGER. In his culture, the mantra was BIGGER is BETTER and BIGGEST is BEST. He was even named after a BIG man – one who stood tall above everyone else. But with all these cloaks piling up at his feet and the crowd in front, he couldn't see. Pushing some to the side, he then saw the one he wanted to die kneeling down, looking pitifully small and ... yet ... yet his face was radiant, even angelic. Saul was incensed! 'How could this little man of no reputation defy his people, his whole culture, all us BIG shots, and still die with dignity?!' Yet, that face would remain frozen in his memory and the conviction it birthed angered him – so much so, that he made it his priority to crush these little people.

From house to house, he harassed and imprisoned Christ's little lambs. He was a BIG man with soldiers at his command and a BIG job to do.

Searching for his father's asses, another Saul in another time wandered through Mt Ephraim, Shalisha and Shaalim. With his supplies exhausted, he looked to return home lest his father begin to worry. Needing advice, he found himself face to face with God's prophet.

Samuel, led of the Spirit, invited him to a feast and said, "...on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you and on all your father's house?"

Young Saul was flabbergasted. Handsome and huge in stature, he was nevertheless small in his own estimation. He replied, "Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And is not my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak so to me?"

Little did he know that he was called to be the first king of Israel. He couldn't imagine it. He didn't really want it. Samuel anointed him, but Saul was too small for the job – at least in his own eyes.

Shortly afterward, Samuel gathered all the tribes of Israel to announce God's choice. Out of them, he called forth the tribe of Benjamin and from these the family of Matri was taken. Drums rolled, trumpets sounded... but Saul was gone! So they sought the Lord and He answered, "Behold, he is hiding himself among the baggage."

Saul, the persecutor of the church, became famous for his dogged pursuit of the new little sect of Judaism called the Way. However, the followers of Jesus had dispersed, and so for his mission to continue, he had to journey to

Damascus. He sought and obtained authority from the High Priest to cross the border and bring the little 'traitors' to justice or to kill them. But, along the way, something completely unexpected – someone much BIGGER than Saul intervened, and the persecutor became the prostrated.

As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

And he said, "Who are You, Lord?"

Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

This event initiated a BIG change in Saul. His allegiance shifted immediately from the Sanhedrin to the Son of God, but there was still a struggle with the 'old man' evident in his life. The Bible tells us in Acts chapter five, "And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. ... Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly."

Nevertheless, as he was used to doing, Saul went straight to the top – the Apostles. Barnabas brought him. Saul had been influential, after all, with the Jews, and he could be instrumental in their conversion to Christ's teachings. The Jews, however, didn't see it this way and Saul's preaching only served to create heated disputes. Finally, when the Hellenists tried to kill him, the brethren sent him back to Tarsus, his home. With his departure, the church had a measure of peace.

As with us all, Saul had some growing up and down to do. The rest of his life was spent chasing the heart of the Son of David, Jesus. Along the way, he faced amazing trials, scourging, beatings, imprisonment and even rejection from the very ones to whom he ministered -- belittling to the carnal man. He even changed his name to Paul which means little.

Saul the King came to a turning point as well. Only two years into his reign, he faced the approach of an overwhelming hoard of Philistines against a ragtag band of skittish followers.

...the Philistines gathered together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude. And they came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that they were in danger (for the people were distressed), then the people hid in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits. And some of the Hebrews

crossed over the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead.

As for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. Then he waited seven days, according to the time set by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. So Saul said, "Bring a burnt offering and peace offerings here to me." And he offered the burnt offering. Now it happened, as soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, that Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might greet him.

And Samuel said, "What have you done?"

Saul's excuse was lame. His action in doing what only Samuel was to do set in motion a trend in his behavior that continued some 38 years. Soon afterward, he again took matters into his own hands and disobeyed the command of the Lord. Samuel then said to him, "When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the LORD anoint you king over Israel?"

You know the story. King Saul spent his lifetime chasing down little David. Meanwhile, in his own mind, he became 'BIGGER' and 'BIGGER' and 'BIGGER' - hugely self-important.

At the end of his life, Paul's perspective of his Lord was so huge that he saw Him as being "all in all" (see 1 Cor 15:28 and Eph 1:23), filling all things. Though he esteemed himself as the chief – it was now as the chief of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Full of faith, he looked forward to a crown of glory.

At the end of his life, King Saul's perspective of the Lord was so small that "...when Saul enquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not" so he sought advice from a medium instead. Shortly afterward, he committed suicide and His crown passed to another.

Do you see the pattern? One man at first esteemed himself greatly but upon yielding his life to Christ, gradually became small in his own eyes. As a consequence, his legacy and fruitfulness was/is HUGE. The other man esteemed himself lightly to begin with and yet because he resisted and rebelled against God's Spirit, came to think of himself and his own interests as paramount. As a result, his legacy and fruitfulness is INSIGNIFICANT. The first man found grace and glory, the second found a grave. What a contrast!

You see, in a certain fashion, how we perceive ourselves is an inverse reflection of how we perceive God. That is, the 'smaller' we are, the 'bigger' He is in comparison and vice versa. This is an important understanding in today's Christian culture. The 'bigness' we're conditioned to value simply strokes the ego. It serves up very spiritual sounding justifications while subverting the very foundations of meaningful spiritual goals and growth.

Too many of us are convinced we've got to make it BIG or be a part of something BIG – musicians, pastors, missionaries as well as folks in the pews – in fact, the modern church is obsessed with bigness as a measure of God's

blessing. In our culture, it is easy to forget, "...that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence." God chooses 'little' over 'big' every time because it glorifies Him.

What bigness generally means for the church is that ministry is significantly less effective on an individual level. Consequently, too many church attendees have no meaningful relationship with a pastor. Many simply rotate in and out of churches like trying a buffet. In effect, the individual is lost in favor of the multitude.

Fundamentally, the western church of today is behaving more like Saul than like Paul. As a result, the worldly culture it is meant to change is instead changing it.

Jesus did not minister this way nor did His apostles. He said, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." He could say that because He kept the focus of His pastoral ministry limited to the number of individuals He could disciple effectively. Check it out, throughout history as well as today, the church has done best spiritually when it was 'small' in its own eyes because it depended on God for

everything. When the church has erred or become inconsequential, it has accompanied a worldly pursuit of 'bigness'. It should sober us that the last days Laodicean church is said to think of itself as being in need of nothing, not even God.

Jesus said in His parable, "Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities." Clearly, He's saying that if we are faithful with the 'little' now, the big responsibilities will come when He returns. So why are we so intent on getting the BIG stuff now? If we're preaching to the lost, then, to be sure, sometimes big crowds are just part of the deal, but the church itself is best tended and cared for when it is literally a 'little flock'.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God." For the individual believer, this whole sense of being little in your own eyes is a key part of what heaven is all about.

Let's consider Jesus – why did He emphasize searching for and finding the one lost lamb and the one lost coin? Why did He limit the scope of His own discipleship? Why did the apostles do likewise? When He said that His followers would do "greater things" than He had done, did He really mean all that we have today? May the love of Christ compel us to minister effectively but without regard for earthly values. (See Phil 2:3-8) His ways are not our ways. As we embrace what Jesus said in Mat 11:29, the bride He returns for will be truly pleasing to Him. Selah.