

Making a Good Church Better 1 Thessalonians

Paul the little man with the big mission 1:1a

There's a Swedish proverb that you've probably heard which goes like this, "Even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in a while." And so he does. But how much better would it be if that squirrel could only see.

Today is a day about vision. If you stay for our annual business meeting, then we'll be talking about vision. We have to talk about vision. No one in this room wants to be a blind squirrel. If we were, we'd still have moments when good things would happen. But no church will survive long without a healthy vision.

That brings us to a new sermon series on the book of 1 Thessalonians that I've entitled, "Making a Good Church Better." How do you do that? Hire a worship leader. Build a new playground. Grow the Sunday School. All very good things, but is that how you make a good church better?

Not really. Well, what then? What will keep Faith Bible Church or any church from losing its sight and having to grope around in the dark for an occasional victory? Answer. An eternal perspective. And so that is why we left off last week with a study of the eternity of God. Looking to the Lord who numbers our days, our years and our future will make a good church better. Keeping an eye on eternity will make a good church better.

Why now? Why study this book now? 1 Thessalonians is a book about hope. Its eye is on the soon return of Jesus Christ. Every chapter of the book is marinated in that thought. He's coming. And when he comes, eternity in heaven will soon follow.

Paul wrote in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

So right! The Thessalonians were suffering for their faith as well. Yet they stood strong. How? Why? Because they kept an eye on eternity and on the coming of Jesus. That's our vision too here at Faith Bible. I'm glad to share in that vision.

So over the next half a year we'll turn each Sunday morning to the pages of this great book. We'll meet its author and the author's right hand men. We'll meet the Thessalonian people. You'll see yourself in them. We'll learn about the coming of Jesus. And we'll find lots and lots of nuts.

Many of you run or exercise on a daily basis. But you shouldn't just jump out of bed and hit the ground running. You should stretch and warm up your muscles, and so will we. We'll quicken our pace as the weeks pile up but over the next three weeks we'll just stretch out a bit—get to know the author of this letter, his two faithful disciples and the people of Thessalonica. So turn briefly to 1 Thessalonians 1:1, which begins with these five words in Greek, four words in English and three names, "Paul, Silvanus and Timothy."

Paul, the little man with a big vision

Silvanus (or Silas), the man who walked with giants

Timothy, who we'll track from his mother's knee to faithful ministry

I. First, the little man with a big vision.

His name is Paul. Although there are three names listed in v. 1, it is the first name listed who is the architect of this letter, though he includes the names of his colleagues in ministry.

a. We know him best as Paul, but originally his name was Saul, which comes from the verb "to ask" or "to desire." It may have been that his Jewish mother chose the name Saul after praying for a child and seeing God answer her prayers. They could not turn to science, so they prayed when they could not bear children. Could it be then that Saul was a miracle child? A barren mother's firstborn joy?

The name Paul means "small" or "little" in Greek. We first encounter the name in Acts 13:9, "Then Saul, who is called Paul."

Notice here that it doesn't say that God changed his name. It only says that some called him Paul. Why? Was it a term of endearment like we might call someone "shorty" or was it a demeaning term like we might say to someone, "Get out of my way, little man." We cannot know for sure.

But there is a clue in a second century letter called the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. It's the story of Paul's Christian influence on a young virgin woman named Thecla who would then follow him on his journeys to serve with him and (as the story ends) was even buried next to him. I mention it here because it is the only early writing that includes a description of the apostle Paul. It reads in chapter 1, verse 7, "At length they saw a man coming (Paul), of a small stature with meeting eyebrows, bald head, bow-legged, strongly built, hollow-eyed, with a large crooked nose; he was full of grace, for sometimes he appeared as a man, sometimes he had the countenance of an angel."

Even though most Christians became satisfied that this letter was not an accurate portrayal of the life of Paul, it must be remembered that for a while this letter was accepted as genuine by most Christians. It was written within 100 years of Paul's death when the memory of Paul's appearance may still have been fresh in the minds or stories of the early church. This work wouldn't have been considered truthful initially by the early church if it wasn't at least an accurate description of Paul's appearance.

So, was Paul then called "little" because he was short? I think so. If so, then, he's my kind of man.

b. What else do we know about him?

He wasn't a polished speaker.

2 Cor. 10:10 records the words of some of his critics. "'For his letters,' they say, 'are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible.'"

Paul even says of himself in 2 Cor. 11:6 that he was "untrained in speech." He adds in 1 Cor. 2:1 that he did not "come with excellence of speech." Many of the early Christians preferred to listen to Apollos; now there was a brilliant and eloquent man. Paul, well, he's a bit dry and droning. Remember the story of Eutychus. In Acts 20:9 Eutychus fell asleep during one of Paul's sermons. Paul wasn't a polished speaker.

c. Also, he had poor handwriting.

Gal. 6:11, "See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand."

Paul regularly used what's called an amanuensis or secretary—meaning that he would dictate his letters to a secretary and then write a few words in his clumsy loopy handwriting at the end. Likely a sign that he had poor eyesight. Many suspect that to be true. I am one of them.

Faith Lesson:

God loves to use the little things and the little people of this world to do great things.

Paul was not an exceptional man as men define greatness (but rather a short man with an unpolished delivery and poor handwriting), yet read 1 Cor. 1:26-31. Especially vs. 27-28.

1 Cor. 1:27-28, "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."

"Weak," v. 27—the same word used by Paul's critics in 2 Cor. 10:10, "[Paul's] bodily presence is weak."

"Despised," v. 28—the same word used in 2 Cor. 10:10, "his speech contemptible ["despised]."

Yet God gave Paul a big vision.

Romans 11:13 and Gal. 2:8. God called Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

Do you know how many Gentiles there were in the world? How could Paul possibly reach them all?

Today there are approximately 14 million Jews in a world of 6,799,900,000 people as of February 1, 2010 (wikipedia.org). Gentiles today therefore make up 99.8% of the world's population, and the percentage in Paul's day couldn't have been much different.

Besides all that, Paul was a Jew. On the fast track to becoming the chief rabbi of Israel. Yet God sent him to the hopeless "dogs." Dirty Gentiles. Idol-worshipping Gentiles. I wonder if Paul thought it at first to be such a grand plan. He may not even have wanted to go.

It's not how he figured his life would be, and yet God called him to a big task. And he answered the call.

His resume would end up looking like this:

- 1) Short, stocky, bald, large nose, hollow eyes, poor speaker, poor handwriting, poor eyesight.
- 2) Strict Jew from youth, raised in Jerusalem as a Pharisee (Acts 26:4-5), the religious group of Jews that was instrumental in securing the crucifixion of Jesus. If Paul was born around 10 A.D. and sent to study under the great Gamaliel in Jerusalem at around 14 years of age in 24 A.D., and if Jesus first arrived in Jerusalem during his first year of ministry in 30 A.D., then Paul would have been around 20 years of age at that time and 23 years old at the crucifixion of Jesus. The Bible never mentions that Paul met Jesus, but he would without a doubt have known about Jesus and would have been in agreement that Jesus be put to death.
- 3) Willing bystander at the stoning and murder of Stephen, one of the early church leaders (Acts 7:58).
- 4) Former hit man—as you may know, before he became a Christian he arrested and delivered up many Christians to their death for being part of a seditious, blasphemous sect (Acts 22:3-4; Gal. 1:13).

BUT God used this unimpressive man with a checkered past to do big things:

His Christian resume would read:

- 1) Saved while traveling to Damascus to arrest more Christians (Acts 9).
- 2) Called by God as an apostle (Gal. 1:15-17).
- 3) Spear-headed several missionary trips around the Roman and Greek world, facing great persecution along the way in order to do "the will of the Lord" (Acts 21:14).
- 4) Founded many churches, including Thessalonica.
- 5) Preacher and teacher (Acts 13:16-41; 17:22-31).
- 6) Penned at least 13 books of the Bible, 14 if we include Hebrews.

Why was he able to accomplish all this?

Because he was an extraordinary man?

No, because he was a little man with a big vision who depended upon a great God.

How about you? Are you exceptional? When you walk in a room do you turn heads? Do people say, "Wow, he is a fantastic speaker. She is a wonderful teacher. He's handsome. She's stunning." Or are you a bit bow-legged? Crooked nosed? Balding? Wacky eyebrows? Poor speaker?

Maybe you have a funny way about you. I hear people say, "Oh, I could never serve in that way, pastor. That's not my thing." Well, what is your thing? What has God gifted you to do? You don't have to be exceptional to be used in his service.

I know some pastors who preach really well. I try hard. I don't always have their way with words. Or I don't have a particularly striking or strong voice. I've always wanted to be like Chuck Swindoll, but at the end of the day, I'm just me.

I know some pastors who are tall and commanding. I'm more of a short and submissive man.

What about our church? Yes, we're hard to see from the road with our parking in the back. It's hard to get into our driveway when you're coming from the south. Our building is small.

But that's not what truly matters. That's not what should dominate our thinking. What matters is that we have an eternal perspective. That we seek God's glory and not our own. That's the kind of people God loves to use.

People like you. You aren't exceptional? Hallelujah. You're ready to be used. How do you believe that God wants to use you? Again, I hear people say all the time, "I have always wanted to start a ministry to the deaf, the hungry, the homeless, the elderly, single moms, the alcoholic," but you struggle on the inside with whether you're smart enough, have enough money or have what it takes to get it done. If the truth were known, others, including myself, might in our "wisdom" look at you and think, "Yeah, that's not likely to happen. You DON'T have what it takes." But what an ugly, despising thought. Who am I to think that God can't use you where God has called you? Who am I to quench your hope? I don't want to do that today.

Today's message is about little people with big vision. It's about a little church with a big vision. Over the years a few members of our church have been involved in post-abortion counseling to ladies. It's not really a ministry of our church. But I love that ministry. I have a vision to see Faith Bible develop another ministry that cares for others. I don't even know what it is. You may not even know what it is. But God knows. I want you to join me in prayer this year that God will use our church in some new way to the helpless or hopeless.

I believe that there are 2 or 3 of you today who have a vision for the helpless and hopeless in our community—whether a ministry to single parents, those recovering from divorce, abused teens, an evangelistic ministry, shut-ins, a Bible study for unbelievers. I don't know what it is but I want you to start talking. Look around this room. Again, I believe there are others who share your vision. Find them. Pray that God will lead you to them. And then when you have found them, come to me. I'll help you any way I can.

Faith Lesson #2

Let's determine to be a church with passionate vision—the little church with a big vision. Let's keep our eye on the prize. We have done some wonderful things over the last year to evidence that our vision is big. We are caring for the next generation—the children. That's always smart. We have been faithful to do outreach. That's having an eternal perspective. Let's make a good church better.