

Text: Ephesians 2:10

Title: Small Things Like These / Translated by Chung Wi

1.

Sometimes, in the midst of our busy daily lives, we suddenly wonder, "Am I living well? Am I living a meaningful life? What kind of life is meaningful and beautiful?" We seem to be wired to find happiness when we engage in meaningful activities. No matter how difficult life may be, if we find fulfillment and meaning within it, happiness overflows. How can we live a meaningful life in the small, everyday events of our lives? This winter in Minnesota has been extremely harsh. The temperature is one thing, but we are heartbroken by the news of our neighbors dying during ICE detentions of undocumented immigrants around Minneapolis. We are tormented by the helplessness of being unable to offer any help or offer any solutions in the face of the tragedy unfolding in our own city, Minnesota. At times, we are gripped by fear as we face the tragedies fueled by the hatred and exclusion targeting people of color and immigrants. One of the victims died after intervening to help a woman being searched by immigration agents. If he had simply passed by, thinking, "It's not my business," and thought it might be a hassle, it wouldn't have happened. How do you feel about the deaths of Renée Good and Alex Preeti? I'm not a citizen of this country, and I'm in no position to comment on its policies. However, it's happening in this land where we live, and it's happening to our neighbors, so I can't help but be concerned. How can we live a good and happy life in this reality? As I was praying with these thoughts in mind, a novel I read last year came to mind. It was the most impressive novel I read last year. Through this novel, I'd like to share with you what constitutes a beautiful and good life.

2. Such a Small Man, Furlong

This novel was also adapted into a film of the same name, starring Irish actor Cillian Murphy, in 2024. This book, "Small Things Like These," is the work of an Irish novelist named Clay Keegan. It centers on Bill Furlong, a man nearing his forties. It's set in 1985 in a small Irish town along the River Barrow. William, nicknamed Bill, is a Christian name not used by Catholics in Ireland. Bill brings coal from the docks, stacks it in a warehouse, and delivers it to the townspeople. He's a hard-working, ordinary man who maintains good relationships with everyone. He's the father of five daughters with his wife, Eileen. Although poor due to his job, which involves covering himself with coal dust, he lives a harmonious and happy life. His daughters attend St. Margaret's, the only decent girls' school in the town, and Bill only hopes they will graduate successfully. This school, run by nuns of the Magdalene

Convent, was called the Magdalene Laundries. It was given this name because it was a Catholic institution that housed single mothers and women stigmatized as morally unsound, and their primary job was laundry. It exploited these women by forcing them to do laundry and other labor, claiming it would cleanse them of their sins and rehabilitate them. The community, however, knew this and turned a blind eye to it, believing it was more important for their daughters to receive a good education.

For some reason, Bill continues to have trouble sleeping at night. After a long day of hard work, he returns home and lies down in bed, but unable to sleep, he wakes up, has a cup of tea, and gazes out the window, watching the dogs and people passing by. What is Bill like? Even as he drives a coal delivery truck, he stops when he sees children begging and offers them a coin. He feels a pang of compassion for the hurting people in his neighborhood. Bill's kind nature stems from his unique past.

### 3. Mrs. Wilson's Care

Bill's mother was a housemaid in Mrs. Wilson's home. Mrs. Wilson was an elderly woman who lived off her husband's pension and ran a farm. A Protestant, Mrs. Wilson didn't kick Bill out, even though he was the child of an unwed mother. Instead, she allowed him to stay in her home. In fact, she cared for him deeply. She taught him to read, gave him books, and sent him to school. Bill's mother died when he was twelve. Despite his mother's death, Mrs. Wilson continued to care for him, not dismissing him. However, Bill was often teased by the other children. Because he was the child of an unwed mother, they wouldn't leave him alone. One day, he would come home with his clothes drenched in saliva. While he faced social discrimination as the child of an unwed mother, he was also given the opportunity to live a normal life under the warm care of Mrs. Wilson. After graduating from school, he enrolled in a technical school, learned skills, and then worked for a coal delivery company. His diligent and unwavering personality led to his promotion.

One day, Bill, who was like that, couldn't sleep for some reason, and in the process, he began to think about something. I'll read aloud the part where his worries are revealed, starting with a conversation with his wife, Eileen.

"Anyway, are we okay?"

"Financially? We've been fine this year, haven't we? I'm still putting money into the credit union every week. Next year, I need to take out a loan and replace the front window before winter. I'm so sick of the wind from outside."

"I don't know what I'm talking about," Furlong sighed. "I'm just a little tired tonight. Don't worry about it." What is it all about? Furlong wondered. Work and endless worries. Waking up in the dark, going to the workshop, delivering all day every day, returning in the dark, sitting at the table, eating dinner, falling asleep, waking up in the dark, facing the same thing all over again. Nothing changes, nothing becomes new. Lately, Furlong often wondered what was important, what was there besides Eileen and his daughters?

I was approaching forty, but I felt like I was going nowhere, like nothing was progressing, and sometimes I couldn't help but wonder what the meaning of these days was (Dasan Books, *These Little Things*, pp. 43-44)."

So, his concern was, "Should I live like this? Is this life meaningful?" And the children he saw every day, the children exposed to violence, the children begging on the streets, things that had nothing to do with him, the very trivial things he encountered, began to weigh on his mind. Like a thorn in his throat, the everyday life around him began to weigh on his heart. Doesn't it strike you as similar to our own concerns these days?

#### 4. Sarah, Encountered at the Convent

While Furlong was pondering whether this life was truly meaningful, an incident occurred. While delivering coal to the convent, he encountered a young, single mother crouching barefoot in the coal shed. The child, named Sarah, had recently given birth, and her clothes were soaked with leaky milk. Curious about what was happening, he took the child to the convent headquarters to discuss it, but the abbess acted as if nothing had happened. Then, she handed him an envelope of money and told him to take it to Eileen. She then began making some rather disconcerting remarks. She asked if he was upset that she had five daughters but no sons, and mentioned that the convent's St. Margaret's School was overcrowded and difficult to enter. By saying these words, the nuns were secretly trying to let him know that he could be harmed. They used the envelope to silence him.

The book describes Furlong's feelings as she leaves the convent:

"Furlong forced himself to reach for the car keys and start the engine. Back on the road, he pushed aside his newfound worries and thought about the child he'd seen at the convent. What bothered Furlong wasn't the child's imprisonment in the coal mine or the nun's attitude. It was the fact that he had simply watched the child's treatment while he was there, never asked about her baby—the only thing she'd asked—and then, like a hypocrite, left the child sitting at the empty table, her milk leaking from under her tiny cardigan, staining her blouse, before going to Mass." (Small Things Like These, p. 99)

Furlong is confronted with the absurdity of the community, a problem that everyone had hushed up and ignored. And he seems to blame himself for being unable to do anything about it.

## 5. Bringing Sarah Out

The final scene of this novel concludes with a single, bold action by Furlong. It was Christmas Eve. After leaving a staff dinner, Furlong headed not home but to the convent's coal cellar. He didn't know if Sarah would be there, but he followed his heart. Sarah was there, dark and cold, and Furlong took her out and headed home. The journey through the snowy city with Sarah barefoot was not short. It was not an easy one, facing the various gazes of people. "What is he trying to do? Doesn't that child seem like a daughter? What will happen to Bill Furlong's daughters if there's a conflict with the convent?" People might whisper, but Furlong walked with the child in silence. The feeling Furlong felt as he finally took her out of there was exhilarating and happy. When Furlong made his decision and took action, he felt all his worries washed away, and he realized that this was true happiness. This is the last paragraph of the novel.

"Furlong knew the worst was just beginning. He could already sense the hardships waiting beyond that door. But the worst that could have happened was already over. The things I didn't do, the things I could have done but didn't do—the things I would have had to live with for the rest of my life—were over. Whatever pain I would face from now on was nothing compared to what this child beside me had already endured, or perhaps would endure in the future. As Furlong walked up the street to his house, carrying a shoebox and a barefoot child, fear overwhelmed all other emotions in his heart. Yet, with a naive heart, he hoped and truly believed that they would somehow manage. (Small Things Like These, pp. 120-21)"

The driving force behind Furlong's determination was Mrs. Wilson's kind deeds long ago. I suspect that without her help, his mother would have ended up in that same situation.

Then it occurred to him that, in the past, the girl Furlong was saving could have been his mother. He realized that all relationships are interconnected. And he realized that the actions he was taking now were an act of self-care.

## 6. God's Works Created for Good Works

We are God's works created to do good works. Good works are more than just good deeds. There are two Greek words for "good": Agathos and Kalos. Agathos reveals God's character and essence. Kalos means "good," meaning beautiful. Ephesians 2:10 uses the word "good" (Agathos). It tells us that good works are about revealing God's essence and most excellent qualities: mercy and love. The Epistle of James, which we continue to discuss, also says that great faith is about using our bodies to do good. Like Furlong, we reveal how beautiful and good God is through our decisions and actions. In this chaotic and confusing reality, we cannot afford to be consumed by helplessness and fear. We must not overlook even the seemingly small things, but practice the love and mercy we have received from God on our neighbors. In that determination and good deed, we can find true happiness.

Last week, I thought about the heart of the woman whom Alex Pretti tried to help, who was killed in Minneapolis. She must have felt both regret and deep respect and gratitude for Pretti, who died in her place. And I realized that if the same thing happened to her, she too would not remain silent, but would jump in and help. We must understand that when we help others, we are not helping them, but helping and caring for ourselves. Don't overlook seemingly small acts of kindness, but put them into practice. God's goodness will be revealed in those acts. Let me suggest one small action we can take. The term "illegal immigrants" carries with it a sense of violence. Instead of calling them illegal immigrants, what if we called them "undocumented immigrants"? Instead of labeling their very existence as illegal, we shift our perception to simply seeing them as lacking documentation or procedures. Then, their humanity will be respected. I hope that by revising this small perspective, we can begin to put our goodness into practice.