

if

Trading Your *If Only* Regrets
for God's *What If* Possibilities

Mark Batterson



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Mark Batterson, *If*
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The Power of *If*

✓ Kiss my wife on top of the Eiffel Tower.

It was a picture perfect day in Paris. After climbing 669 steps to the second floor, we hitched a very scary elevator ride to the top of the Eiffel Tower. Then, with France as my witness, I kissed my wife. Life goal #102? Check!

And it all started with *if*.

I'll explain, but first, let's have a little fun. How was that goal accomplished? Well, that depends on how you look at it. You could simply say that I puckered my lips, took an approach path from the left, closed my eyes at the last second, and voilà—a kiss in France, not to be confused with a French kiss.

That's how it happened, but there's more to it than that. That simple kiss was the result of a rather complex itinerary. We flew out of Dulles International Airport on an Airbus A320, made it through French customs, took the regional RER train to Paris, hailed a taxi whose driver enjoyed saying *mademoiselle* a little too much for my taste, and got walking directions from a French lady

with a dog in her purse. Not even kidding! Classic as a croissant! But that too is just a fraction of the story.

You could argue that our Eiffel Tower Kiss originated the moment I set life goal #102. And that's partially true. You won't accomplish 100 percent of the goals you don't set. But the true origin of our kiss traces all the way back to the 1889 World's Fair in Paris when more than a hundred artists submitted plans to design the centerpiece, the masterpiece of the Exposition Universelle.

The winner was an engineer named Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, who proposed a 984-foot tower, the tallest building in the world at that time. Skeptics scoffed at his design, calling it useless and artless. Eiffel called her *La Dame De Fer*—the Iron Lady.

It was Gustave Eiffel's *if* that made our romantic rendezvous atop the tower possible, but Eiffel himself thanked seventy-two scientists, engineers, and mathematicians on whose shoulders he stood. Their names are inscribed on the tower, and without their collective genius, our kiss is cancelled. So I guess we owe our kiss to each of their *ifs* as well.

Then there are the three hundred riveters, hammermen, and carpenters who put together the 18,038-piece jigsaw puzzle of wrought iron in two years, two months, and five days. Oh, and don't forget the acrobatic team Eiffel hired to help his workers maintain balance on very thin beams during strong gusts of wind. We have each of them to thank—as well as the Paris city council that voted in 1909 *not* to tear down the tower despite the fact that its twenty-year permit had expired. We owe our kiss to each councilmember and to each of the voters who put them in office.

It's starting to sound like all of history revolves around and conspired for our kiss, so let me stop there and make my point. Every moment, like our kiss atop the Eiffel Tower, is created by millions of *ifs* that combine in a million different ways to make that moment possible.

And if you need to read that sentence again, no shame. It's complicated—as complicated as the sovereignty of God. Yet as simple as *if*.

Gustave Eiffel did not build his tower so Lora and I could kiss on top of it. Nevertheless, his *if* made it possible. And it's your *ifs* that open doors of opportunity for others, most of whom you won't meet on this side of eternity. But make no mistake about it, every little *if* makes an exponential difference across time and eternity.

History is like an intricately interwoven tapestry with infinite patterns that only the Omniscient One can see and foresee—but *if* threads the needle. Your *ifs* don't just change the trajectory of your life; they change the course of history.

Our kiss atop the Eiffel Tower is part of a chain reaction that started when I wondered if Lora would go out with me. Then I acted on that *if*—well, actually I dialed and hung up a few times first. You could get away with that before caller ID.

Long story short, one *if* led to another *if*, which led to *I do*. The net result? Twenty-two years of marriage and three *ifs* named Parker, Summer, and Josiah.

If you stop and think about it, everything begins with *if*.

Every achievement, from the Nobel Prize to the Oscars, begins with *what if?* Every dream, from landing a man on the moon to the moon pies created to commemorate it, begins with *what if?* Every breakthrough, from the internet to iTunes, begins with *what if?*

There are 1,784 *ifs* in the Bible. Most of those *ifs* function as conditional conjunctions on the front end of God's promises. If we meet the condition, God delivers on the promise! So all that stands between your current circumstances and your wildest dreams is one little *if*.

One little *if* can change everything.

One little *if* can change anything.

WHAT IF?

On August 15, 1987, Howard Schultz was faced with the toughest decision of his life—whether or not to buy a small chain of coffeehouses with a strange name: Starbucks.

Knowing what we know now, it seems like a no-brainer. But to Schultz, the \$3.8 million price tag felt like a case of the salmon swallowing the whale. In his memoir, *Pour Your Heart into It*, the architect behind the Starbucks brand reflects on his *what if* moment.

This is my moment, I thought. *If I don't seize the opportunity, if I don't step out of my comfort zone and risk it all, if I let too much time tick on, my moment will pass.* I knew that if I didn't take advantage of this opportunity, I would replay it in my mind for my whole life, wondering: *What if?*¹

Howard Schultz made a defining decision to give up the safety net of his \$75,000 salary to pursue his passion for all things coffee. Starbucks stock went public five years later, on June 26, 1992. It was the second most actively traded stock on the NASDAQ that day, and by the closing bell its market capitalization stood at \$273 million. Not bad for a \$3.8 million investment!

Starbucks now has 16,580 stores in 40 countries, with revenues topping \$4.7 billion, and their 137,000 employees totals twice the population of Greenland. By conservative estimates, Starbucks sold 3,861,778,846 cups of coffee last year.² Not to mention the other 87,000 possible drink combinations!³

And every sip of every drink started with *what if*.

For the record, my favorite drink at Starbucks is a caramel macchiato. Just because we own and operate an independent coffeehouse on Capitol Hill doesn't mean I'm antiestablishment. Listen, if I'm nowhere near Ebenezer's coffeehouse, I'll take caffeine wherever I can get it. Which, thanks to Starbucks, seems like every other street corner in America!

If you reverse engineer Starbucks all the way back to its humble origins, it started with Howard Schultz's *what if*. That's true of Ebenezer's too—*what if* we built a coffeehouse where our church and our community could cross paths?

A million customers later, *what if* is making lots of dreams come true. Every penny of net profit, more than \$1 million now,

has been reinvested in a wide variety of kingdom causes. And every penny traces back to *what if*.

What's your *what if*?

If you don't know yet, keep reading.

I want you to know that I've been praying for you. While I may not know your name or your circumstances, God does. And I've been asking Him to put this book in the right hands at the right time. That's my prayer for every book I write. So when someone apologizes for having not read one of my books, apology accepted. I trust God's timing.

Of course, the flip side is true. The fact that you hold this book in your hands is evidence that you're ready for *what if*. I'm praying that God will reveal it as you read.

If is more than a book.

It's your *what if*.

But first, you have to get past *if only*.

YOUR GREATEST REGRET

One of the saddest epitaphs in the Bible is hidden away in Jeremiah 46:17. It reminds me of an old headstone in an old cemetery, overgrown with weeds. The prophet exclaims,

Give Pharaoh of Egypt the title King Bombast, the man who missed his moment. (NEB)

Pharaoh Hophra was the fourth king of the twenty-sixth dynasty of Egypt. As the political and religious leader of one of the most advanced civilizations on earth, the pharaoh had so much potential, so much power. History was his for the taking, his for the making. But he missed his *what if* moment. The opportunity isn't identified, but Pharaoh Hophra ruled for nineteen years, so he probably missed more than one! And because he missed his *what if*, he took his *if only* regrets with him to his tomb.

Let me make a rather bold prediction.

At the end of your life, your greatest regret won't be *the things you did but wish you hadn't*. Your greatest regret will be the things *you didn't do but wish you had*. It's the *what if* dreams that we never act upon that turn into *if only* regrets.

That prediction is backed up by a study done by two social psychologists, Tom Gilovich and Vicki Medvec.⁴ According to their research, time is a key factor in what we regret. In the short term, we tend to regret *actions* more than *inactions* by a count of 53 to 47 percent. In other words, we feel acute regret over the mistakes we've made. But over the long haul, we regret *inactions* more than *actions*, 84 to 16 percent.

That doesn't mean we won't have some deep-seated regrets about things we wish we hadn't said or done, but our longest-lasting regrets will be the opportunities we left on the table. Those are the *if onlys* that haunt us to the grave and beyond.

Now let me translate that study into theological terms.

We fixate on sins of commission far too much. We practice holiness by subtraction—don't do this, don't do that, and you're okay. The problem with that is this: you can do nothing wrong and still do nothing right.

Righteousness is more than doing nothing wrong—it's doing something *right*. It's not just resisting temptation—it's going after God-ordained opportunities. Holiness by subtraction is playing not to lose. Righteousness is going all in with God. It's playing to win. It's living as if the victory has already been won at Calvary's cross. And it has.

In my opinion, it's the *sins of omission* that grieve the heart of our heavenly Father most—the wouldas, couldas, and shouldas. Why? Because no one knows our God-given potential like the God who gave it to us in the first place!

Potential is God's gift to us.

Making the most of it is our gift back to God.

Anything less results in regret.

COUNTERFACTUAL THINKING

Little-known fact: I wanted to be a history teacher when I was in high school. I've settled for armchair historian, but I'm still a history junkie.

Technically, history is the study of past events—what actually happened. But there is a branch of history, counterfactual theory, that asks the *what if* questions. It considers the alternate realities that might have emerged if the hinges of history had swung the other way.

It's been said that *what if* is the historian's favorite question.⁵

What if one of the four musket balls that passed through George Washington's coat during the Battle of Monongahela in 1755 had pierced his heart?

What if the D-Day invasion by Allied forces on June 6, 1944, had failed to halt the Nazi regime?

What if the confederates had won the Battle of Little Round Top at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863?

History is full of *what ifs*, and so is Scripture.

What if David had missed Goliath's forehead?

What if Esther had not fasted, thereby finding favor, thus saving the Jewish people from genocide?

What if Joseph and Mary had not heeded the angel's warning to flee Bethlehem before Herod's henchmen showed up?

Let's stay in that vein.

Counterfactual theory is simply an exercise in counterfactual thinking. And it's not just a helpful exercise for historians; it's a healthy exercise for anyone and everyone. Counterfactual thinking is a critical dimension of goal setting and decision making. It's thinking outside the box. It's going against the grain. It's the divergent ability to reimagine alternatives.

And that's what this book is designed to do. It's not just history or Scripture that are full of *what if* moments. They are the turning points, the tipping points in our lives too!

Neuroimaging has shown that as we age, our cognitive center of gravity shifts from the imaginative right brain to the logical left brain. At some point, most of us stop living out of imagination and start living out of memory. That's the day we stop creating the future and start repeating the past. That's the day we stop living by faith and start living by logic. That's the day we stop dreaming of *what if* possibilities and end up with *if only* regrets.

But it doesn't have to be that way!

LIFE PLAN

I recently spent two days with a life coach crafting a life plan.

Those two days will pay dividends for the rest of my life. I only wish I hadn't waited as long as I did to do it. Honestly, I'd spent more time planning vacations than planning my life! I had some life goals, like goal #102. But I wasn't living with the kind of intentionality it takes to turn possibilities into realities.

I went through nineteen exercises with my life coach, each one aimed at reimagining my life. The focus was my future, but we looked at it through the prism of my past. It was like a connect-the-dots puzzle, with the letters spelling out God's faithfulness.

By the time we were done, my sense of destiny was off the charts. One of those exercises involved storyboarding my life by identifying turning points. Next, we titled the chapters of my life. Finally, we pinpointed what are called "life gates"—the defining moments that change the trajectory of our lives. They are the *what if* moments when a dream is conceived, a decision is made, or a risk is taken.

One of the revelations I had during that life plan process is that I am my own historian. It's God who ordains our days, orders our steps, and prepares good works in advance. But we have to be students of our own history, including our *if only* regrets. We have

to learn the lessons and leverage the mistakes. We have to connect the dots between cause and effect. And we have to reimagine our future through the frame of God’s promises.

No matter how many regrets you have, God is the God of second chances. No matter how deep-seated those regrets are, He can turn your *if only* regrets into *what if* possibilities.

This book is full of stories about people just like you who have done just that. Jesus puts a hyphen in history. If you give Him complete editorial control, the Author and Finisher of our faith will write *His-story* through your life. I can’t promise a fairytale without any pain or suffering, but I can promise that it will end with happily ever after. Even better, happily *forever* after.

And that brings us to the eighth chapter of Romans.

THE GREAT EIGHT

When it comes to the eighth chapter of Romans, even wordsmiths are at a loss for words. Not many adjectives can do justice to its mystery and majesty.

Theologian and pastor John Piper calls the eighth chapter of Romans the greatest chapter in the Bible. In shorthand, “the Great Eight.”⁶

Who am I to argue with him?

Martin Luther called it “the clearest gospel of them all.”⁷ William Tyndale, who was martyred for translating the Bible into English, called it “the most excellent part of the New Testament.”⁸ And Douglass Moo, a professor at one of my alma maters, calls it “the inner sanctuary within the cathedral of Christian faith.”⁹

I’ve always thought of it as “The *If* Chapter.” The ten *ifs* in Romans 8 add up to infinite possibilities. One last label—“Super 8.” Like a good film, Romans 8 has got it all—action, adventure, story line, even some special effects.

It's Michelangelo's *David*.

It's da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*.

It's Beethoven's Symphony No. 5.

It's Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

The Great Eight starts with a big bang:

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.¹⁰

It has a fairytale finish:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹¹

Right in the middle, it crosses the Brooklyn Bridge of the Bible:

All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.¹²

Then there's the subplot:

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.¹³

I'll touch on all of those truths, but the touchstone is a little two-letter word in the middle of the chapter. It's the linchpin, the kingpin. It's the hinge on which the greatest chapter turns.

If God is for us, who can be against us?¹⁴

That's the game changer, the life changer. But you've got to settle the issue. If you have subconscious doubts about God's good intentions, they'll manifest in a thousand forms of fear. If you believe with every fiber of your being that God is for you, an alternate reality awaits you.

That's the goal, but first, one disclaimer.

This book is not a systematic theology, which is an oxymoron anyway!


If is *not* a commentary; it's more of an impressionist painting.

It's not about parsing thirty-nine verses with left-brain logic. It's about painting a landscape of faith, hope, and love with right-brain brushstrokes. I loved the Great Eight when I started writing, just like I loved Lora the day we got married. Twenty-two years later, our love is deeper, longer, and stronger. That's how I felt about the Great Eight when I finished this book, and that's my prayer for you. May you fall in love with the God of *what if* all over again! May your pulse quicken as you turn the pages of this book and, more importantly, *the Book*.

I hope you start reading and can't stop, but let me offer a suggestion if I may. *If* has thirty chapters for a reason. I'd recommend one chapter a day. Think of it as thirty days to *what if*. And why not read it with a friend, a small group, or a book club? *If* loves company!

What's your *what if*?

Let's find out.



*What if you are one decision away
from a totally different life?*