

“If Only ...”
by Malcolm Smith

It was after the Sunday evening service and Ken, one of the elders of the church, was visiting with me in the local diner. He had been sharing with me the horrors of a division that had taken place in the church during the past months that had resulted in the pastor resigning and the congregation being scattered.

He stared into his coffee cup, saying, *“If only Pastor John had seen it our way, things would be so different now!”*

I looked at him over my orange juice. He was so sincere, not realizing his attitude was killing both himself and the church. I said, “If only the people had made a different decision over Pastor John’s decision! The fact is, Ken, we do not deal with what might have been but with what is. God is not at work in some fantasy world of ‘if only,’ but in the concrete world of what is. You are moaning to me of what might have been, which tells me you are not living where Christ is working! You have placed Yourself in the fantasy world of nowhere!”

We are all guilty of Ken’s paralyzing mistake. We play God! Looking at the facts of life as they are, we assume an infinite knowledge and talk of what might have been, “if only.” The fact is, no one knows what might have been. All we do know is that the infinitely good God will take the mistake and turn it for good.

The story of Joseph in the Old Testament is the classic example of the man who could have spiraled into the fantasy world of “if only.” “If only” his family had taken his dreams seriously. What might have been if Potiphar’s wife had not tried to seduce him. “If only” the servant of Pharaoh had remembered to tell the authorities about him when he was released. But it wasn’t so, and in it all Joseph did not whine with self-pity, *“If only things were different.”* His attitude comes through clearly in Genesis 50:20:

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

The simple fact of the matter is, the “if only” does not exist and never will. The pulsating *now* with all its problems and hurts is the only reality. Christ does not live and express Himself in the wishful world of dreams, but in our present and actual history. Our mistakes and failures do not send Him away! He makes all our negatives to be the expression of His positive answer.

Proverbs describes the fool and sluggard as a man whose eyes are ever on the horizon, never looking at what is now. The wise man knows that what might have been isn’t, and so embraces life as he immediately finds it.

I am not talking merely from my studies, but from my experience. I know what it is to sit on the edge of life’s craters and inhale the sulphur of defeats, failure and sin. I have chastised myself knowing that I am responsible for my foolish decisions and wrong actions. Above the clamor of my thoughts I hear myself saying, *“If only you had not done thus and so ...”* or, *“What might have been today if you had acted differently.”* When I hear the dialogue beginning I want to enter in, to agree, and discuss with myself what might have been. Instead I take myself in hand: the fact is I did act as I did and said what I said. To live in the fantasy world of “if only” will paralyze me in the real world of now.

To retreat into the world of might-have-beens is to endanger and harm ourselves in many ways. First and foremost, it is to slander God’s character. He knew from before the foundation of the world what we would do and say, and knowing it all He loved us. Now

that my failure has been actualized in history, He does not stop loving me. To say “if only” is to place ourselves with the pagans and their finite gods — gods that can be surprised by the activity of their adherents.

God knew what we would do, and fully forgives us through what Christ accomplished at the cross. Better than that, His love is an infinitely wise love that not only forgives but actually weaves our mistakes into His plan and turns them for good.

Those who have left swamp lands of what might have been are the supremely happy ones of this world. They have seen their mistakes, admitted that they were wrong and turned from that way knowing all is forgiven through the cross. They now walk on through life, daring to believe that God in His wisdom now actually turns those mistakes to good.

David committed adultery with Bathsheba and went on to arrange the murder of her husband, Uriah. We are stunned — surely it is time to close the story of David with a sob “*if only ...*,” what might have been the story of David if he had not sinned! We would record him as one of the sad might-have-beens of history. But not God! He lives in and works with the actual fact of our history; and beginning where David was, in his sin, He brought him to repentance and the writing of Psalms 51 and 32.

It is most significant to me that in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus mention is made of the fact that Solomon’s mother was Bathsheba. It is as if God is saying, “See, I am not thwarted by the sins of my people: rather I use their mistakes, incorporating them into *My* plan. Through the worst David did, I turned it around and used it as a vehicle to bring *My* Son into the world.”

The gospel does not only come to us with the message of forgiveness, but also with the message of hope that God will turn the worst into the best.

Theologians still discuss whether Paul should have taken his last trip to Jerusalem that resulted in his arrest. Certainly the Spirit warned him ahead of time what would happen, but he chose to go ahead. What might the Acts have been like if Paul had avoided Jerusalem? The fact is he didn’t, but rather was arrested and taken a prisoner to Rome. Nowhere in Scripture are we introduced to the discussion of whether he was right or wrong. The fact is he made the choices he did, and God’s wisdom was at work in every one of them. In the two years of house arrest in Rome he wrote some of the greatest letters in the New Testament. We do not discover God in what might have been, but in the hard facts of what is.

Over the years as a pastor, and even more so now that I speak to millions each day over radio, I hear the cry of thousands sobbing out their own “if only.”

The mother kneeling by her son dead in an auto accident: “If only our last words had not been in anger. I will never forgive myself.”

A husband bowed beside the hospital bed of his wife: “She was so good to me, if only I had told her how I loved her. Now it is forever too late.”

A young man in his twenties stared moodily at the floor of my study: “If only I had studied while I was in college instead of fooling around. Now it is too late and I do not have a degree.”

A young woman sobbing hysterically: “What a beautiful life we might have had, but he divorced me and now there is nothing.”

The fact is that what happened is past — you are who you are! To allow your mind to wander into the land of might-have-been is to exit this life for a non-existent world. God is at work in the now-situation. In us as we are and where we are He works to glorify His name.

The Christian lives in that faith, and glorifies God that He is at work in the disasters of life.

My hobby is gardening by the organic method. I depend on a compost heap for my healthy soil. Every day I take the waste from the kitchen and garden to the compost heap. The junk, filth, and garbage of the house and garden actually becomes the best and healthiest soil in my garden. So God's grace will take our failures, if we will give them to Him, and put them into His redemptive compost, actively working in them for good. As the months go by we realize that the areas of our life where we failed have become ever increasingly the expression of Christ our strength.

To say and expect this is a massive step of faith, for legalism, ever challenges this ultimate stand of grace. We are surrounded by very sincere Pharisees who look in disdain as we wallow in our failures saying, "If only you had acted differently ...". Sadly they assure us that although we have been forgiven, our sin has forever doomed us to the permissive and secondary will of God. To this, faith in God's grace answers that the blood of Christ has cleansed us from all sin and God is now at work in the failure bringing to pass His marvelous purposes.

But do our failures exclude us from God's best? I think that that is a miswording of the question. We should ask, "Can the infinitely perfect One have anything in His plans but the best?" There are many routes that lead to the consummation of His plan for us, but all of them are best, for we deal with the God who can only be best. Nowhere in Scripture is there mention of a permissive will of God.

The world of might-have-been is a child of legalism. Implicit in the phrase is the condemnation that we could have done better, tried harder or disciplined ourselves more thoroughly. Now that we have failed to be what we might have been, all we are left with is despair. Legalistic religion shakes its head sadly as it walks away from us saying, "If only you were a different kind of person; because you are as you are, you will have to settle for second best!"

From our pit of misery we look at others who have not failed as we have and are convinced that God loves them better than us. "If only" we had learned the secret of being like them!

The grace of God does not only hold out forgiveness *for* our failures, but the strong hope that God is at work *in* the failure. God does not condone the sin, nor does He grind His plans for us to a halt whining, "If only she had seen what I was getting at." Knowing what we would do, His love wisdom has already planned to redeem the mistake and make it part of His great plan for us.

Let us suppose I am traveling from Seattle to New York. There is to be a plane change in Chicago, but due to weather conditions, I miss my New York connection. I am not doomed to spend the rest of my life in the Chicago airport! There are other flights to New York from Chicago. I do not sit in the departure lounge wringing my hands saying, "If only I had not missed the flight."

I missed meeting the person who was assigned to the seat next to me, and I missed the meal the first flight was to serve. But there is someone else to meet on flight no. 2, and they also serve a meal that is in no way inferior to the meal on flight no. 1. It also comes up the standard set by the airline.

When we fail, God does not condemn us to the departure lounge of His second best; life does not become a hopeless penance of “if only ...”

The infinitely wise One has other ways of accomplishing His will and purpose in our lives. Our involvements will be different, and the circumstances too, but they will come up to the standard of the good and perfect wisdom.

But is there never a time when a man can miss the beautiful life that God had planned for him? Is it not possible for a man to sit out his life in ever increasing despair? Certainly! Even Jesus wept over Jerusalem:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you will kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34).

In Galatians 2:21 Paul spoke of the possibility of frustrating the grace of God.

God will never work in our lives against our will. We are not called God’s robots, but His sons, members of His family who can choose whether or not to cooperate with Him. Paradoxically, however, He is the One who wills within us, creating in us a response of repentance and faith.

Repentance is simply changing our mind about ourselves and our actions. We finally come to see it God’s way. It means we admit our wrong to God, and turn helplessly to Him. If we choose the path of sin, refusing to acknowledge it as sin, we can expect a compounding of despair until God finally reaches us through the very real mistakes of life. Then we acknowledge that we have sinned and thank Him for the forgiveness that is already ours.

Paul spoke scathingly to the idea that we can go on in sin in Romans 6:1-2:

“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin: how can we live in it any longer?”

But repentance can never be divorced from faith. Faith responds to God’s love and grace, daring to believe it, and we go on in confidence that God is working in the situation as it is, no matter what shipwreck we may seem to have made. If we did not believe that God is working in our failures, “if only” would become a final resting place. We would paralyze ourselves in the departure lounge, never daring to embark on the ongoing purposes of God’s grace. We would become locked into a deadening past instead of into the fantastic futures of grace.

Faith dares to forget what God has forgotten; faith rests in the good news that in our failures we are not terminal. God is not put off by our mistakes, but takes us wherever we are in life and brings us on to His perfect purposes.

Paul is probably the greatest example of this kind of faith. He might have sat in Damascus condemning himself for the saints he had imprisoned and killed. Instead, his attitude is that whatever wrong he had done, God is using it to demonstrate His mercy to sinners. As for himself, he chooses to forget the events and press on to God’s bright future. He wrote in Philippians 3:13-14:

“But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

The word “forgetting” is a strong word in the original: it means to completely forget and put out of mind.

Omar Khayam wrote, “The stars are setting and the caravan starts for the dawn of nothingness.” The pagan can only look to the future with that kind of despair. The Christian looks at his defeats and mistakes and rests in God’s forgiveness and the out-working of Christ who now lives within. He understands that God makes the dark holes of our life the foundation of His most beautiful buildings.

Daniel, as a young man in Jerusalem, shows this daring faith. He was taken as a prisoner of war to Babylon. It looked like a massive victory for the demon gods of Babylon, but, instead, Daniel writes that the *Lord* delivered Jerusalem into the hands of the Babylonian king (Dan. 1:2). There is no “if only this had not happened,” but instead an embracing of life as it really was, and a looking to the future as God continues to work out His purposes.

The way we view God at work in ourselves is the way we look at others. If our life is a tangled bog of “if only’s,” we can only offer condemnation to those who fail around us. If we have seen that God has forgiven and is now working in us, we are quick to assure others of forgiveness and join our faith with theirs, looking for what God is doing in their lives now.

I reminded Ken in the diner that night that if the church he spoke of was gossiping of what might have been if Pastor John had seen it their way, they were still in the departure lounge of the church split. By the same token, if Pastor John told his friends that the will of God had been missed by the congregation’s action, he too was paralyzed into that moment of resigning as pastor of the church. Christ lives in the now with all its hurts and sadnesses, living in us through it all, bringing us to His redemption. The congregation should be looking with excitement at what the Spirit was doing in their pastor, having forgiven him all, even as Pastor John should be looking at what God was doing in them.

It is a fact that the hatred and bitterness that plagues the world and the church is in great part born out of “if only” attitudes. It begins by our hating ourselves for not reaching a standard; it soon matures to despising Pastor John and all the other stubborn folk who do not see things our way and have upset what we considered to be the perfect plan.

A new life can begin now as you accept the *fact* of the way things are, walking out of the fantasy world of what might be. Embrace life as it is with the knowledge Christ lives in you in it. Choose to see others not as they might be, but as they are. Instead of cutting them off with the “if only” of the Pharisees, become a channel of God’s love that makes over anew.