

A Journey Down the Road of If Only's and What If's

Let's turn together to Esther chapter 8. Next week we'll be wrapping up the book of Esther and in May we'll be starting a series called *Who Am I? Finding Our Identity In Christ*. I think it's going to be an important series for us because sometimes we as Christians can emphasize what we are supposed to do, but miss that Jesus' primary work in our lives isn't about what we do, it's about who we are. So we'll be starting that series in May.

Esther 8:1-2

This sermon needs to come with a warning: I am going to violate strict rules of sound expository preaching this morning by taking the liberty of reading *into* this passage how Esther *may* have been feeling at this point in her story. Chapter 8 is coming near the end of Esther's story, and it presents an interesting pivot point between her past and her future, and at this point Esther may have been tempted to look down the road of her past and think *if only*. If only I had done things differently, things might have been different. And at this point she might well have been tempted to look down the road of her future and think *what if?* There is the potential for terrible things to unfold and she might well have struggled with the fear of the worse happening. Whether Esther actually struggled with if only's and what if's, she had potential to, and I think many of us do struggle with if only's and what if's as we interpret our lives past and future.

- I. Regrets try to rewrite our past through if only's
- II. Fears try to predict our future through what if's

I. Regrets try to rewrite our past through if only's

At this point in Esther's story, the man who had plotted to annihilate Esther's people has been executed and Esther has finally revealed to King Ahasuerus not only that she is Jewish but that Mordecai the Jew is also her cousin. For over five years Esther has kept this information from the king out of fear of what he'd do if he found out, and yet when the king finds out, he promotes Mordecai to Haman's position as second most powerful man in all of Persia.

And *if only's* could easily creep in for Esther. If only in chapter 2 when Esther brought Mordecai's warning to the king that two men were plotting to assassinate him, she had also told the king that Mordecai was her cousin - really more like a dad, having raised her after her parents died - maybe instead of Ahasuerus immediately promoting the evil Haman he would have promoted Mordecai instead like he does here in chapter 8. And *if only* she had told the king that she was Jewish, he might never have authorized Haman's plan to annihilate every Jew in the Persian empire. Maybe all this evil could have been avoided if only...if only...

If only's try to rewrite our past, if only in our mind. It was this phenomenon of if only's that made me realize I was taking football too seriously. It happened 19 years ago but I still remember it clearly (which shows I take football too seriously). It was December, 1997 and my team the Giant's were playing the Vikings in a wild card game. There were less than 2 minutes left in the game, and the Giants were ahead by 9 points, 22-13. I was just getting ready to call my brother in law who was a Vikings-fan to gloat - I mean, console - him when the Giants began to meltdown before my eyes. Tempers flared and they

began arguing with each other and the Vikings took advantage of their breakdown and threw a quick touchdown. Now the score was 22-20 with about a minute left and the only chance the Vikings had was an onside kick. Onside kicks almost never work, so I wasn't too worried. And sure enough the kicker kicked it right into the sure hands of Giants WR Chris Calloway. All he needed to do was hold onto the ball and the game was over. But it bounced out of his hands and into the hands of a Vikings player and the Vikings had the ball! But they still had a lot of yardage to cover to make a field goal and little time to do it in, but a pass interference penalty against the Giants gave the Vikings 30 yards and in the closing seconds of the game they kicked a field goal winning the game 23-22.

For days I walked around reliving that game only with a different ending. If only they hadn't started arguing and breaking down as a team. If only they hadn't allowed that quick scoring pass. If only Calloway had held onto the ball. If only they hadn't had that pass interference call against them. If only one small thing had gone differently the Giants would have won the game and moved on in the play-offs. If only's try to rewrite the past but they never really can.

What I did with football we can do in more serious things in life too. It's natural to have a sense of regret over decisions and choices we've made or negative things happening that we wish had happened differently. But when that sense of "if only" goes on and on we begin to live our lives on the road of if only:

- If only my parents had stayed together...If only my parents had told me they loved me... If only my dad didn't get abusive when he got angry ...
- If only I had gone to college, If only I had tried harder in my marriage, If only I had spent more time with my kids.
- I hadn't been injured at work, that person I thought was a friend hadn't betrayed me, I hadn't been physically abused as a child, if only my loved one hadn't died.

If only's can also be very personal.

- If only I didn't have that physical infirmity, If only I looked different, If only I had a different personality, If only I was better at sports, If only I didn't have such a hard time communicating with people...And on and on the if only's can go.

Going down the road of if only's doesn't change a thing and it paralyzes us from experiencing God's best for our lives right now. When we come to Christ in faith God doesn't rewrite our past, He redeems it. He takes the bad and the pain and the regrets and mistakes - the sins we have committed and the sins that have been committed against us - and He redeems it all for His glory and our good. No matter what your past, you can get to God's best for your life from where you are right now. God is an expert at redeeming bad and sad and terrible and bringing good out of them. The Bible isn't a story of if only's: *if only Adam and Eve hadn't eaten that fruit. If only Joseph's brother's hadn't sold him into slavery. If only David hadn't sinned with Bathsheba. If only wicked men hadn't crucified Jesus.* The Bible isn't a story of if only's, it's a story of God redeeming brokenness and regret and sin and even evil for His glory and the great good of His people. Esther's story is a prime example - there are no *if only's* here - her story was exactly what God wanted it to be and it became a part of God's tapestry of redemptive grace. God wants to do that with your past and mine as well.

Don't get me wrong. There are reasons to look back in our lives. We can learn from the past. If there's unconfessed sin in our lives, we need to bring it to God in repentance or it will begin to rot and stink up our lives. Years ago there was a smell in our car. At first it was mild so I checked the car but couldn't see anything that would smell so I figured it's just in my mind. But the smell got worse and worse until finally I couldn't ignore it and after looking thoroughly I found the culprit way back in the corner of the trunk: a cantelope had fallen out of a grocery bag several days earlier and was rotting in a quiet corner of the trunk. When we have unconfessed sin in our back trunk, it starts going bad. We get it out of the trunk by confessing it to God, repenting of it, and asking for God's forgiveness. 1 John 1:9 gives us this promise: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* God cleans out the trunk when we confess our sins to God.

But we aren't supposed to live life on the road of if only's. If you have been, confess that to God, and ask Him to help you believe that He has redeemed your past so that it is a part of His story of grace and will be a part of how God uses you in the present and future - as it was for Esther. Regrets try to rewrite our past through if only's. God redeems our past through Christ's mercy and forgiveness.

II. Fears try to predict our future through what if's (read vv. 3-11)

Esther still has some really big fears about the future of her people. Haman is dead, but the king's decree allowing the enemies of the Jews to kill them all on the 13th day of the 12th month is still in effect and Esther is filled with fear for her people and that fear could have raised some pretty big "what if's" in her mind.

- What if the king refuses to do anything about his earlier edict?
- What if nothing can be done about it?
- What if the Jews are unable to defend themselves against this slaughter?
- What if, after all her efforts, her people are annihilated anyway?

If only's look down the road of our past, what if's look down the road of our future and try to fill our hearts with fearful predictions of what may happen. The fact is, most of the things we fear never happen. We are actually pretty bad at making predictions. I was recently reminded of a Popular Mechanics article from the 1950's that tried to envision what life would look like in the year 2000 and pretty much nothing they predicted came to pass. One of their more innovative predictions was that underwear would be made from Rayon so that when they got old and ratty, rather than throw them out, chemical factories would buy them and convert them into candy. That's just wrong on so many levels! We could never look at candy the same way again: was this Snickers made from my old knickers?

Most of the things we fear never actually come to pass, but some things do come to pass. Some fears aren't based in reality, but some, like Esther's fears, are very real.

- What if that spot on my lung turns out to be cancer?
- What if I lose my job in the next batch of lay-offs?
- What if my child never comes to faith in Christ?
- What if we can't get ourselves out of the deep hole of debt we're in?

What if's can paralyze us from doing things that we feel we should do:

- What if I try something new and fail?
- What if I do the wrong thing? Or say the wrong thing?
- What if I get involved and things get worse?
- What if I take a stand for what I believe and people reject me for it?

A journey down the road of *what if's* will lead to one of two extremes: either paralyzation we become afraid of stepping out into something new out of these vague fears of what if. Or the attempt to control everything. People who have control issues often are motivated by fear of what might happen if they lose complete control. Neither extreme is healthy or sustainable. Life isn't meant to be avoided and it isn't meant to be tightly

controlled.

God has a different way for us to deal with what if's than with if only's. We can't change the past but we can change the future. In Christ God has redeemed our past but in Christ God give *us* to opportunity to *redeem* our future, not in the sense of salvation but in the sense of using it to make wiser, better choices. Eph. 5:16 tells us to *redeem the time, because the days are evil*. In other words, don't just accept the future, affect the future. Shape the future by the grace of God. That's what Esther did. The wheels were in motion for millions of her people, men, women, and children, to be murdered in cold blood, but Esther did two things and from those two things I want to draw two parallel actions for us to take to overcome the what ifs.

1. *Esther appealed to the king for help (vs. 3)*

Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. (Esther 8:3 ESV)

The first time Esther approached the king with a request she was composed and dignified, but this time she's weeping and pleading as she unloads her heart and her fears and tells the king that she won't be able to bear the disaster that is coming to the Jews. As selfish and callous as King Ahasuerus is, his heart is moved by Esther's plea for mercy for her people. How much more can we approach our good king, Jesus Christ and bring our fears and what if's to him, confident that he hears and will answer?

Heb. 4:16 encourages us to *approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need*. The Greek word has this sense of *timely help*. God will give us what we need when we need it. When you're facing something that is keeping you up at night, facing something that has you paralyzed with what if's, bring it to the throne of grace. Like Esther pour your heart out to God and be confident that He hears and He cares.

There is future-changing, future-redeeming power in prayer because God is a powerful king who is merciful to help us in our time of need. God has called you for such a time as this! Not to launch out in your own strength, but to call upon Him for His help and His strength. So the first step Esther took was to appeal to the king and our first step is to pray to our King too. God will give timely help and direction as we do.

2. *Esther and Mordecai took steps to iredeem the future*

For Such A Time As This
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We'll unpack this more next week, but King Ahasuerus wants to help Esther and Mordecai but he reminds them that once a Persian king decreed a law, it couldn't be revoked. The law that authorized the murder of all Jews on the 13th day of the 12th month couldn't be changed. But what he can do is give Esther and Mordecai the authority to counter the evil with good. So they write a law that says the Jews have the king's full backing to defend themselves.

We can't change everything, but neither should we passively accept everything. Redeeming the time means taking steps to improve our future and the future of others. I was really amazed to hear the testimony of Melissa Ohden at the STPRC Banquet Thursday night. She was the survivor of a failed saline infusion abortion. Her mother was coerced into choosing an abortion, and when Melissa was born alive, her grandmother told the nursing staff to leave her to die on the table. That's a past Melissa can't change, but she has chosen to shape her future and the future of thousands of others by speaking out for life. A big part of God redeeming our past is to use it to redeem our future - reshaping it for His glory and the good of others.

God doesn't want us living on the road of *if only's* and *what if's*. In Christ He has redeemed our past, and wants to help us take steps to redeem the future. Begin with praying to your gracious King, and ask Him for ways that He can use your life - including your past - for His glory and the good of others. Let's pray.