

Fresh Start

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The Never Ending “If Onlys”

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Before I was saved, I had one of the worst cases of the “If Onlys” in the history of the world. If you’re not familiar the “If Onlys,” of mine went like this. I’d finally be happy if only:

- I could lose 80 pounds
- Grow my radio show to more stations
- Make more money
- Live in a bigger house

That list is far from exhaustive, but you get the idea. I was unhappy; far unhappier than I or anyone else realized. I mostly kept that unhappiness bottled up inside. “If only” are among the two most spiritually toxic words to Christ followers. Because your happiness will forever be pinned to future fulfillment of a desire. As a result, even if you do fulfill a desire, your nature will be to find more things for which to pine. I in fact got some of the things I longed for on the list above and continued to be unhappy and yes, I did find new things to want. To put this in context, consider the Apostle Paul boasting of his hardships in 2 Corinthians 11:22-29:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

Paul was boasting to refute those who were challenging the validity of his words. Imagine if Paul had said: “I can really start doing the work God has called me to do if only:

- The beatings would stop,
- The hunger would stop,
- The shipwrecks would stop,
- The flogging would stop,
- The stoning would stop.”

In fact, Jesus made it quite clear to Paul how much he would suffer. And Paul makes clear that we are not to merely tolerate hardships: *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* Romans 5:3-5

Glance up again at Paul's list of hardships and try, even for one second, to consider rejoicing in them. But from the moment Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul's entire life was focused on one thing: spreading the gospel. His joy was rooted firmly in what Jesus had revealed to him. His terrible circumstances did not rob him of his joy, Paul rejoiced in them. And when Paul did ask God to remove “a thorn from his flesh” (we don't know what it was), the answer, three times, was no; God's grace was enough to sustain Paul. It was an answer he accepted. It's an answer we accept when we aren't a slave to our “if onlys.”

Now, I humbly suggest that you do a self-examination of the “if only” list in your life. Don't hold back. Write down as many you can think of. Then compare your list with Paul's above. If our joy is rooted in the promise of God's future for us, happiness won't elude us despite our circumstances. Here's one more example from Paul to show how we can do this. While chained to his Roman jailers he rejoiced because the men had no choice but to listen to Paul preach the gospel. Paul realized his jailers were a captive audience!

I would prayerfully ask you to consider that as you meditate and pray over how wonderful your life can be, even with your “if only” list unfulfilled.