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1 IF ONLY

*Watch for big problems; they disguise
big opportunities.*

H. JACKSON BROWN, *LIFE'S LITTLE INSTRUCTION BOOK*

It was 7:15 on a beautiful Sunday morning. I was sitting at the island in our kitchen having a cup of tea when the phone rang.

“Good morning,” I said cheerfully.

The caller was hesitant. Finally a muffled voice sobbed into the receiver.

“Kendra,” the man said emotionally, “this is Steve. Pam asked me to call you.”

Pam is a dear friend and sister in Christ. Our distant locations and busy lives prohibit frequent visits, but we stay in touch by phone calls, email, and texting.

My mind raced as I tried to determine what had prompted this tearful call. Something was wrong, and I literally held my breath as he continued.

“It’s about Emily.”

Emily was their new baby, their third daughter, and she was just four months old. She was obviously in trouble, but what was wrong? My mind began to race again, wondering what might have happened to trigger the call.

“We need you to pray,” Steve sobbed. “She was just diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor.”

For a moment I was too shocked to respond. In all my imagining, I had not thought of this happening. How was it possible? How could someone so young and so innocent have a condition considered by medical experts to be so rare?

“What? Tell me more,” I replied. Secretly I hoped I had not heard him correctly, that I had misunderstood his words and his tone.

“Emily has been having problems for about three weeks. We have had her examined by several physicians, and up until this point they had no clue as to the problem. Just this morning it was determined that her illness is the result of a brain tumor,” Steve explained with patience and with pain.

“Why can’t they take it out? Why is it inoperable?” I asked, still unable to grasp what I was hearing.

“It is a vascular tumor, one surrounded by blood vessels. If they remove it, they are sure Emily will bleed to death,” he said, beginning to cry once again.

Steve, the father of this critically ill baby, had been sent to the phone to call a list of prayer warriors. My name was just one on the list.

* * *

When one door of happiness closes, another opens;
but often we look so long at the closed door
that we do not see the one that has been opened for us.

Helen Keller

* * *

It was February and time once again for the Sunday school convention. For several years, Shirley and I had helped at the convention and shared a hotel room.

It was always a treat to be with Shirley. Her wit and enthusiasm made our job at the book table fun and our time off even more enjoyable. She was a good friend and a mentor to me in my faith.

During a particularly long break, Shirley and I went to our hotel room to rest and talk. The convention was going well. Book sales were ringing in, and we had been having fun.

We took off our shoes, got as comfortable as we could on the hotel furniture, and started to visit. We talked about Shirley's two teenage kids—about their plans and their futures—and about my younger kids. We talked about how spectacular our husbands were and how fortunate we were. We laughed and we cried. There was nothing unusual in our doing these things, except that possibly we laughed a little less than usual and cried a little more.

This was, you see, a monumental day in Shirley's life. It was not monumental in the sense of accomplishment or rewards. It was monumental in another way. When we got to our room that afternoon, before we shared our thoughts and our dreams with one another, Shirley combed her hair and it began to fall out in handfuls from her recent chemotherapy.

Only weeks before, Shirley had gone to the hospital to have a benign lump removed and had instead undergone a radical mastectomy. Her chemotherapy had begun, and after one session she was losing her hair. Shirley was prepared for her hair loss in a practical way. She had a wig for public events and a turban for private moments. But she was not prepared in an emotional sense.

We cried together as we mourned the physical losses Shirley had already endured and thought of the many events yet to come that were too precious for Shirley to miss.

* * *
When you can't change
the direction of the wind,
adjust your sails.

Max DuPree

* * *

“I got married with a very idealistic view of marriage,” Betty reflected. “You know, the little house with the white picket fence and everybody living happily ever after. By the time I realized that this wasn’t true in my case and admitted to myself that my husband was not only an unbeliever (contrary to what he had told me prior to the wedding) but was also physically abusive, I already had children. I wanted them to experience as ideal an atmosphere as possible. And making sure they did became my mission. I could not worry about the things I could not change.

* * *
God is in charge.

Every disappointment is His appointment.

Kay Arthur

* * *

“I remember lying in my bed one night and realizing Pete was not going to be the father he was supposed to be. I knew that, and I knew I had to go forward and do what I could to be a good mother to my children. I wanted them to have a Christian home and a church. In the spiritual sense, I was responsible for these young lives. I needed to teach them the ways of the Lord and bring them the gospel. That was my responsibility. I also had to understand that I was not responsible for my husband’s salvation or his parenting. So I said to God, ‘I’ll be

their mother, but you're going to have to be their Father. They don't have a father who will pray with them or read the Bible to them or teach them about You. You are going to have to father them. I'm not going to worry. I know You will meet their needs.'”

What do these real-life stories have in common? Steve and Pam faced a life-and-death situation with their baby daughter; Shirley was battling cancer; Betty found herself in an unhealthy, unhappy marriage. The common thread is that each situation had the potential to be a big “if only.”

If only our daughter were not so ill . . .

If only my health were restored . . .

If only I had a loving husband . . .

If only.

“If onlys” have existed since ancient times. In Old Testament days, Joseph had a lengthy list of possible “if onlys.” Remember his story? Joseph's father, Jacob, preferred him over his brothers. He was Dad's favorite, and to illustrate this fact, Jacob gave Joseph a stunning coat of many colors. His older brothers were jealous, and they threw him into a pit and then sold him into slavery.

There were more “if onlys.” Joseph was taken to a foreign land by the slave traders. There he diligently served Potiphar, the second in command of the nation. Potiphar's wife propositioned Joseph, and when he resisted, she lied and claimed he had assaulted her. Joseph was thrown into prison for an unspecified sentence, with no appeals.

If only Joseph had been given a lighter jail sentence. If only Potiphar's wife had been truthful. If only she had been attracted to the gardener instead. If only the slave traders had taken a different route that day. If only Joseph's brothers had thrown him into a creek or a stream. If only Jacob had made several coats of

many colors. Joseph's list of "if onlys" could have been quite long.

Now let's take a look at Esther. Here is another Old Testament star who had plenty of opportunities for "if onlys." A quick review reminds us that Esther was a beautiful young woman raised in Persia by her cousin Mordecai. At a young age she was chosen by the king to be his wife. This position was not all glitz and glamour, however. The king had some pretty frightening traditions. For example, if someone entered his chamber without being called, the king had the option of recognizing him with the extension of his scepter, or ignoring him, which meant "off with his (or her) head."

Haman, the king's right-hand man, had an intense dislike for the Jews. After Esther's cousin Mordecai refused to bow to Haman (or to anyone else but God), Haman's self-proclaimed mission became the annihilation of the Jews. Through trickery, Haman was able to convince the king to sanction his plan for Jewish destruction. Neither Haman nor the king knew that the queen was a Jew.

The plot thickened until ultimately Mordecai insisted Queen Esther enter the king's chambers with a plan to stop Haman. (Remember that if she were not officially recognized by the king, she would not have to worry about repeating the mistake.)

If only Mordecai had another plan. If only Esther could find someone else to stop Haman's evil. If only the king were a little more tolerant of unannounced visitors. If only she weren't the queen of Persia. The list could go on and on.

Do you have an "if only" in your life? If only your parents had appreciated your talent as much as they did your brother's. If only your father hadn't left your mother. If only your mother hadn't been an alcoholic. If only your income were greater. If only you didn't live in _____ (fill in the blank). If only your husband were more affectionate. If only you weren't alone.

We could go on and on. There is an unending list of possi-

ble “if onlys.” Some of them you have created yourself (if only you hadn’t married the one you did). Some are beyond our control (if only you hadn’t been the firstborn child). Some are seemingly insignificant (if only your garage were bigger), and some are monumental (if only you could conceive a child).

An “if only” has the potential to assume a tremendous amount of power. If unleashed, an “if only” can overtake your attitudes and control your choices. The good news is that you can determine whether to give the “if only” control.

Joseph had a lot of “if onlys” from which he could choose. All of those things could have justified Joseph having a bad attitude, being jealous, or lacking confidence. But Joseph chose not to allow the “if onlys” to dictate his attitude. He made the choice not to let the “if onlys” control his future.

Esther requested that the Jewish community join her in prayer and fasting for three days before she approached the king. She did not dwell on her possible “if onlys.” She did not let them control her actions, attitudes, or confidence. She was not gripped by fear. Instead she chose not to worry and to believe, with her cousin Mordecai, that perhaps she was made queen “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

Do you want your circumstances, your “if onlys,” to control your attitude and rule your life? Or do you want to make choices that can lead to a positive, Christ-like attitude?

I know *my* answer to these questions. If I chose to, I could make a pretty impressive list of “if onlys” of my own. Unpleasant things have happened in my life from time to time, creating “if onlys” that could justify a bad attitude. Rather than let those things control my life and create resentment, however, I prefer to make choices that will result in a positive attitude. Choices for a positive attitude are much more productive and much more pleasant than choices that allow the “if onlys” to take control.

* * *

Experience is not what happens to a man,
it's what a man does with what happens to him.

James Huxley

* * *

After speaking to a group of gourmet cooks several years ago (not about cooking but about working with people), I acquired a wonderful recipe for garlic bread sticks. I must pause at this point and tell you how I define a “wonderful recipe.” First, it must taste good. Second, it must involve very little work but give the illusion that I am a good cook. This particular recipe met both criteria, and the finished product looked great too! It was a wonderful recipe.

We were having a potluck for our Sunday school class the next week. Traditionally, I determine what I will bring to a potluck by frantically running to the pantry an hour before the event and trying to decide what I can make with what I have on hand. I am unique in that way within my church. Most of my girlfriends are spectacular cooks. (My definition of “spectacular cooks”: The dish they bring to the potluck not only tastes good but also looks like it could be photographed for *Better Homes and Gardens*.)

I decided that this time I would actually plan ahead. I purchased the ingredients for the garlic bread sticks, followed the recipe, and prepared them (in bulk) as my offering for the evening. When we arrived at the potluck, I unobtrusively placed my bread sticks in the long line of delicious food. Almost everyone sampled them.

“Oooo! These bread sticks are delicious! Barb, did you bring these?”

“No? Loretta, did you make these great bread sticks?”

“You didn’t? Sue, are these from your kitchen?”

This questioning continued until finally I couldn’t stand it.

“Someone ask me if I made the bread sticks,” I demanded. At first no one responded. I guess they were in shock at the thought.

Finally, in disbelief, someone asked, “Kendra, did you make the bread sticks?” By then everyone had guessed the answer to the question. I had made the bread sticks. I had a good recipe with quality ingredients, and I chose to follow it.

Although I am no culinary wizard, I have learned through more than thirty years of marriage and raising a family that with a good recipe (which I actually follow) even *I* can be a good cook.

So read on, and I will share with you several choices you can make to maintain the attitude that the Word commands. These choices are like the ingredients in a wonderful recipe, but—just like my famous bread stick recipe—you must use the specified ingredients and you must follow the recipe.

We’ll see how Steve and Pam, Shirley, Betty, and many others have made choices that have resulted in a Christ-like attitude in spite of their circumstances and in spite of their potential “if onlys.”

You, too, can triumph over your “if onlys” and make choices that will lead to a positive attitude.

* * *

**Forgetting what is behind and straining
toward what is ahead, I press on.**

Philippians 3:13–14

* * *

STUDY QUESTIONS

If Only

1. Can you think of a time when you started a sentence with the words *If Only* or *What If*? How did you finish that sentence?
2. How do “*If Onlys*” and “*What Ifs*” control your actions and decisions?
3. Read and reflect on Philippians 3:12–16. What are the key words Paul uses to press on?