

## ***“If only...”***

If only.... What a sad phrase!

Sometimes we say “if only” about small things:

- \* After exams, I have heard students say, “*If only* I had studied more.”
- \* Stepping on the scales, I have said, “*If only* I had skipped dessert.”

Sometimes “if only” changes the entire trajectory of life:

- \* “*If only* I had not taken that first drink.”
- \* “*If only* I had spent more time with my children.”
- \* “*If only* I had not begun that sinful relationship.”
- \* “*If only* I had not said those harsh words.”

As he gasps his final breaths, does Saul remember the moment when Samuel anointed him King of Israel? As he realizes the tragedy of a wasted life, does Saul say, “*If only...*”?

As Peter hears the crowing of the rooster, does he say, “*If only* I had not denied my Master”?

Paul surely must have said, “*If only* I had not persecuted followers of The Way.”

I can think of few phrases sadder than “if only.” Many people ended 2018 with an “if only.” They look back on a year of regrets.

“If only” speaks of regrets and disappointment. But there is another phrase that I want to carry into 2019, a phrase that speaks of hope, “But God...”

## ***“But God...”***

But God.... Words of hope!

Joseph is sold into slavery by his own brothers. Years later, he says, “You meant evil against me, *but God* meant it for good” (Gen 50:20). How do we avoid bitterness toward those who wrong us? By remembering, “*but God ...*”

The Psalmist nearly despairs at the injustice of this world. He watches as the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Yet he finds hope in this promise, “My flesh and my heart may fail, *but God* is the strength of my heart” (Ps 73:26). How do maintain hope in a world of hopelessness? By remembering, “*but God ...*”

Paul remembers the exhaustion of a stressful ministry. He was “afflicted at every turn” and battled “fighting without and fear within.” Then he remembers, “*but God*, who comforts the downcast, comforted us....” (2 Cor 7:6). How do we find strength for ministry in discouraging times? By remembering, “*but God ....*”

Paul warns that we face an enemy who knows our areas of weakness and who is determined to destroy us. In our own strength, we will fall. When we face temptation, Paul reminds us, “*but God* is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able....” (1 Cor 10:13). How do we maintain a life of daily victory? By remembering, “*but God....*”

Then in my favorite use of this phrase, Paul describes our past life. We were “dead in trespasses and sins”; we “lived in the passions of our flesh”; we were “children of wrath.” “*But God*, being rich in mercy... made us alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:4). Because He is rich in mercy, our past is forgiven; because He is rich in mercy, we are made alive with Christ. How do we move beyond the regrets of the past? By remembering, “*but God ....*”

If you are living with an “*if only*” from your past, let me encourage you to begin this new year with “*but God.*” Will it remove all the pain? No. Will it erase the consequences of past sin? No. Will you still face tears and sleepless nights? Perhaps. *But God* can bring joy out of your sorrow. He can give hope for your future. He can turn your night into day. *But God....*