

Bruce Humphrey
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The Great Sadness
2 Samuel 18:32-33 and 2 Samuel 12:17-23

“Would I had died instead of you O Absalom my son!” 2 Samuel 18:33

“It is so easy to get sucked into the if-only game, and playing it is a short and slippery slide into despair. *If only* he had decided... *if only* he had said... *if only* he had left the day before... *if only, if only, if only.*” (p. 65)

We are now in the third week of our series on the book *The Shack*. I want to pause before we go into more details in the imaginative middle of the book to reflect on the raw humanity this book offers. This author presents a clear picture of grief in all its terrible stages. With the death of his daughter, Mack struggles to go through the stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and finally acceptance. He seems unable to get to the stage of acceptance because he is stuck in his sadness. The author of *The Shack* uses Mack’s grief to explore with us a common way we get stuck in grief. It is the same way that King David became stuck in his grief over the death of his son Absalom.

INSERT 2 SAMUEL 18:32-33

If you have not already gone through grief in your life you certainly will someday. If life for you goes well you may grieve somewhat over the loss of a great grandparent. Then one day you will lose a beloved grandparent. Eventually you will grow old enough to lose a parent and eventually the generations following you will grieve over your death. We all understand the circle of life. Perhaps we can hold off death for a while through exercise and healthy diet, but it catches up with all of us eventually.

I recall hearing a woman describing her aging mother’s daily exercise routine. “My mom started walking five miles a day when she turned seventy. Now she is ninety-two and we have no idea where she is.”

Yes, we will grieve over the loss of those who go ahead of us. However, a much harder grief hits us when we lose a loved one in an untimely tragic death. What could be more horrifying than losing a spouse in a car accident or a child in a tragedy? *The Shack* pulls no punches as it jumps into one of the toughest questions of life. “Why did God take my child from me?”

We have two Bible stories about King David grieving over the death of his sons. In one case, King David got stuck in an unhealthy grief for his son Absalom. In the other case, he found a way to move on with his life. What is the difference between healthy grief that moves appropriately through the stages and unhealthy grief that gets stuck?

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his wonderful book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, has an amazing chapter titled “God Helps Those Who Stop Hurting Themselves.” In this chapter, he identifies one of the common mistakes we make in the midst of our sorrows. We make them worse than they need to be. Kushner writes, “One of the worst things that happens to a person who has been hurt by life is that he tends to compound the damage by hurting himself a second time.” (p. 87)

How do we do this? Kushner clarifies that we tend to take things personally. Life hands us a sorrow and we go to that horrible place of blame and guilt. We assume that God must be punishing me for something I did. It must be my fault.

King David did this very thing when he grieved for his rebel son Absalom. Absalom had grown up in his father's palace. He had been nurtured as a prince and was used to getting what he wanted. When he felt it was his turn to rule the kingdom, he rebelled against his father by gathering troops and capturing his father's palace. After David fled from his own palace, he was forced to send his troops out to battle against his son. As the troops went off to battle, King David pleaded with the generals not to kill Absalom. However, Absalom died a horrible death in the battle. The Bible tells us that he rode under a tree and his hair got caught in a branch. As he hung painfully by his hair, one of the generals speared him to death. On hearing this painful news, David grieved desperately for his son, "O Absalom, my son."

Certainly, this was an appropriate response for King David on hearing of his son's death. Unfortunately, what followed was an example of someone whose grief became stuck. David was unable to get over his sadness. Eventually, his own generals and advisors had to plead with him to move back into the palace and begin making the governmental decisions he was responsible to make. The next few stories give us an image of a weary and defeated King David. King David got stuck in his grief.

What happened? It is apparent that King David blamed himself for his son's rebellion. He grieved with the words, "If only I had died instead of you." Do you notice the most poisonous words in this statement?

I recall reading about a therapist who helped someone realize that one of the worst things we do in the midst of deep sadness after a crisis in life is to say the words, "If only..." "If only I'd made a better choice." "If only I had been wiser..." "If only I had known..." "If only I had not said that..." The therapist explained, "The trouble with *if only* is that it doesn't change anything. It keeps the person facing the wrong way—backward instead of forward. It wastes time. ...it can become ... an excuse for not trying anymore."¹

So how do we get unstuck from this unhealthy guilty way of thinking? The answer is to replace the two words *if only* with the words *next time*. *If only* is filled with guilt and self-blame. *Next time* empowers us to move into the future with a lesson in hand. *If only* stays in the past replaying what happened. It creates a roadblock of regret. *Next time* invites us to move forward and resume living.

Contrast the death of Absalom with the death of King David's baby born to Bathsheba. The Bible tells us that prior to the child's death the king had fasted and wept, prayed and pleaded that the sickly baby might live. He bargained with God to spare his child's life. We can only guess what his thoughts must have been. This was a child conceived in adultery. It is likely that King David argued that God ought not to punish the child for the father's sins. On hearing of the child's death, however, David surprised everyone by ending his fast. He totally shocked his advisors by getting up, taking a shower, eating a meal and returning to his work of running the government.

What was the difference between his grief for Absalom and his grief for his baby? The answer is two words.

King David grieved for Absalom with the words that get us stuck, "If only I could have died instead of you." But he accepted his baby's death and moved on into the future. "Can I bring him back to me? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

¹ Arthur Gordon, *A Touch of Wonder* (Carmel: Guideposts Associates, Inc.: 1974) 77.

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Before his encounter with God in the shack, Mack gets stuck in his grief as he plays the *if only* guilt trip in his own mind. Before he leaves to meet God at the shack, he says to his friend Willie, “Maybe what happened to Missy is God’s judgment for what I did to my dad.” He is taking a circumstance where a murderer randomly targeted his daughter and feels as though his daughter was taken from him in order to punish him for something he did years before. This kind of thinking always gets us stuck in the past. Why do we do this to ourselves?

My worst sermon in thirty years of ministry happened a couple months after our oldest son’s coma in Arizona. Some may recall I told about our son’s coma two weeks ago. Our sixteen-year-old son was rushed to the hospital in an encephalitis coma. After a few days, he emerged from the coma. He was released from the hospital with pin-point brain damaged areas and had to relearn the basics of math and various reasoning skills by working with a tutor. He would eventually drop out of high school as a result of his depression.

In my attempts to make sense of a teenaged son not waking in the morning, I tried to figure out how I must be responsible. Assuming God was somehow punishing me personally, I placed the blame for our son’s coma squarely on my own shoulders. I blamed myself. “If only I had gotten up early to do my morning devotions.” “If only I had found him earlier.” “If only I had figured out sooner what was wrong.” “If only I had called 911 immediately.” Even though our son was the one burdened with recuperating from the coma and re-learning his “reading, writing, and arithmetic,” I was stuck in my own unhealthy grief.

I can relate to Mack’s “great sadness.” My “great sadness” finally came out in a sermon I preached to that Arizona congregation that had prayed, supported us through our tragedy, and surrounded us with love. One Sunday morning I preached a sermon about how our son’s coma was really God punishing me for my not remaining close enough to the Lord in my devotional life. I confessed that I had not maintained a faithful time of morning devotions and had slipped into merely running a church more than loving Jesus. I turned the pulpit that morning into my personal therapy session. It was awful.

Kate was furious that Sunday afternoon when I got home. “How dare you make our son’s illness all about you!? He will live with the consequences of this illness for the rest of his life. It’s not about you!”

Within days, I had so many people in our congregation telling me they disagreed entirely with my interpretation of events, it forced me to examine my own grief. I had taken a crisis of life and made it personal. I had taken something God wanted to redeem into a lesson for the future, and gotten stuck by making it an “*if only*” experience stuck in the past. Fortunately, our wonderfully healthy congregation helped me to get out of myself long enough to take a hard look at the God I was describing. Did I really believe in a God who punishes a father’s lack of devotion with a son’s coma? Does our God punish sons for their father’s sins? Of course not. In my grief, I had multiplied the tragedy by taking it as God’s punishment against me.

I suspect that many of us can relate to King David and Mack when it comes to getting stuck in our guilt and unhealthy grief after a life crisis. So how do we move from *if only* to *next time*? For me, one Bible verse has helped me reframe my past and move into my future. It has become so important in my life that it is a Bible verse worth

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memorizing. It goes like this: “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old is passed away, everything becomes new. 2 Corinthians 5:17.” Have you claimed Jesus’ promise to make you a new creation?