

The Power of

Excerpts from *If*

if

Mark Batterson



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Mark Batterson, *The Power of If*

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The Power of *If*

✓ Kiss my wife on top of the Eiffel Tower.

It was a picture perfect day in Paris. After climbing 669 steps to the second floor, we hitched a very scary elevator ride to the top of the Eiffel Tower. Then, with France as my witness, I kissed my wife. Life goal #102? Check!

And it all started with *if*.

I'll explain, but first, let's have a little fun. How was that goal accomplished? Well, that depends on how you look at it. You could simply say that I puckered my lips, took an approach path from the left, closed my eyes at the last second, and voilà—a kiss in France, not to be confused with a French kiss.

Mark Batterson, ⁵The Power of If

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That's how it happened, but there's more to it than that. That simple kiss was the result of a rather complex itinerary. We flew out of Dulles International Airport on an Airbus A320, made it through French customs, took the regional RER train to Paris, hailed a taxi whose driver enjoyed saying *mademoiselle* a little too much for my taste, and got walking directions from a French lady with a dog in her purse. Not even kidding! Classic as a croissant! But that too is just a fraction of the story.

You could argue that our Eiffel Tower kiss originated the moment I set life goal #102. And that's partially true. You won't accomplish 100 percent of the goals you don't set. But the true origin of our kiss traces all the way back to the 1889 World's Fair in Paris when more than a hundred artists submitted plans to design the centerpiece, the masterpiece of the Exposition Universelle.

The winner was an engineer named Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, who proposed a 984-foot tower, the tallest building in the world at that time. Skeptics scoffed at his design, calling it useless and artless. Eiffel called her *La Dame De Fer*—the Iron Lady.

It was Gustave Eiffel's *if* that made our romantic rendezvous atop the tower possible, but Eiffel himself thanked seventy-two scientists, engineers, and mathematicians on whose shoulders he stood. Their names are inscribed on the tower, and without their

collective genius, our kiss is cancelled. So I guess we owe our kiss to each of their *ifs* as well.

Then there are the three hundred riveters, hammermen, and carpenters who put together the 18,038-piece jigsaw puzzle of wrought iron in two years, two months, and five days. Oh, and don't forget the acrobatic team Eiffel hired to help his workers maintain balance on very thin beams during strong gusts of wind. We have each of them to thank—as well as the Paris city council that voted in 1909 *not* to tear down the tower despite the fact that its twenty-year permit had expired. We owe our kiss to each councilmember and to each of the voters who put them in office.

It's starting to sound like all of history revolves around and conspired for our kiss, so let me stop there and make my point. Every moment, like our kiss atop the Eiffel Tower, is created by millions of *ifs* that combine in a million different ways to make that moment possible.

And if you need to read that sentence again, no shame. It's complicated—as complicated as the sovereignty of God. Yet as simple as *if*.

Gustave Eiffel did not build his tower so Lora and I could kiss on top of it. Nevertheless, his *if* made it possible. And it's your *ifs* that open doors of opportunity for others, most of whom you won't meet on this side of eternity. But make no mistake about it,

every little *if* makes an exponential difference across time and eternity.

History is like an intricately interwoven tapestry with infinite patterns that only the Omniscient One can see and foresee—but *if* threads the needle. Your *ifs* don't just change the trajectory of your life; they change the course of history.

Our kiss atop the Eiffel Tower is part of a chain reaction that started when I wondered if Lora would go out with me. Then I acted on that *if*—well, actually I dialed and hung up a few times first. You could get away with that before caller ID.

Long story short, one *if* led to another *if*, which led to *I do*. The net result? Twenty-two years of marriage and three *ifs* named Parker, Summer, and Josiah.

If you stop and think about it, everything begins with *if*.

Every achievement, from the Nobel Prize to the Oscars, begins with *what if?* Every dream, from landing a man on the moon to the moon pies created to commemorate it, begins with *what if?* Every breakthrough, from the internet to iTunes, begins with *what if?*

There are 1,784 *ifs* in the Bible. Most of those *ifs* function as conditional conjunctions on the front end of God's promises. If we meet the condition, God delivers on the promise! So all that stands between your current circumstances and your wildest dreams is one little *if*.

One little *if* can change everything.
One little *if* can change anything.

WHAT IF?

On August 15, 1987, Howard Schultz was faced with the toughest decision of his life—whether or not to buy a small chain of coffeehouses with a strange name: Starbucks.

Knowing what we know now, it seems like a no-brainer. But to Schultz, the \$3.8 million price tag felt like a case of the salmon swallowing the whale. In his memoir, *Pour Your Heart into It*, the architect behind the Starbucks brand reflects on his *what if* moment.

*This is my moment, I thought. If I don't seize the opportunity, if I don't step out of my comfort zone and risk it all, if I let too much time tick on, my moment will pass. I knew that if I didn't take advantage of this opportunity, I would replay it in my mind for my whole life, wondering: What if?*¹

Howard Schultz made a defining decision to give up the safety net of his \$75,000 salary to pursue his passion for all things coffee. Starbucks stock went public five years later, on June 26, 1992. It was the second most actively traded stock on the NASDAQ that day, and by the closing bell its market capitalization

stood at \$273 million. Not bad for a \$3.8 million investment!

Starbucks now has 16,580 stores in 40 countries, with revenues topping \$4.7 billion, and their 137,000 employees totals twice the population of Greenland. By conservative estimates, Starbucks sold 3,861,778,846 cups of coffee last year.² Not to mention the other 87,000 possible drink combinations!³

And every sip of every drink started with *what if*.

For the record, my favorite drink at Starbucks is a caramel macchiato. Just because we own and operate an independent coffeehouse on Capitol Hill doesn't mean I'm antiestablishment. Listen, if I'm nowhere near Ebenezer's coffeehouse, I'll take caffeine wherever I can get it. Which, thanks to Starbucks, seems like every other street corner in America!

If you reverse engineer Starbucks all the way back to its humble origins, it started with Howard Schultz's *what if*. That's true of Ebenezer's too—*what if* we built a coffeehouse where our church and our community could cross paths?

A million customers later, that *what if* is making lots of dreams come true. Every penny of net profit, more than \$1 million now, has been reinvested in a wide variety of kingdom causes. And every penny traces back to *what if*.

What's your *what if*?

If you don't know yet, keep reading.

COUNTERFACTUAL THINKING

Technically, history is the study of past events—what actually happened. But there is a branch of history, counterfactual theory, that asks the *what if* questions. It considers the alternate realities that might have emerged if the hinges of history had swung the other way.

It's been said that *what if* is the historian's favorite question.⁴

What if one of the four musket balls that passed through George Washington's coat during the Battle of Monongahela in 1755 had pierced his heart?

What if the D-Day invasion by Allied forces on June 6, 1944, had failed to halt the Nazi regime?

What if the confederates had won the Battle of Little Round Top at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863?

History is full of *what ifs*, and so is Scripture.

What if David had missed Goliath's forehead?

What if Esther had not fasted, thereby finding favor, thus saving the Jewish people from genocide?

What if Joseph and Mary had not heeded the angel's warning to flee Bethlehem before Herod's henchmen showed up?

Let's stay in that vein.

Counterfactual theory is simply an exercise in counterfactual thinking. And it's not just a helpful exercise for historians; it's a healthy exercise for

anyone and everyone. Counterfactual thinking is a critical dimension of goal setting and decision making. It's thinking outside the box. It's going against the grain. It's the divergent ability to reimagine alternatives.

And that's what this little book is designed to do. It's not just history or Scripture that are full of *what if* moments. They are the turning points, the tipping points in our lives too!

I recently spent two days with a life coach crafting a life plan.

I went through nineteen exercises with my life coach, each one aimed at reimagining my life. The focus was my future, but we looked at it through the prism of my past. It was like a connect-the-dots puzzle, with the letters spelling out God's faithfulness.

By the time we were done, my sense of destiny was off the charts. One of those exercises involved storyboarding my life by identifying turning points. Next, we titled the chapters of my life. Finally, we pinpointed what are called "life gates"—the defining moments that change the trajectory of our lives. They are the *what if* moments when a dream is conceived, a decision is made, or a risk is taken.

Those two days will pay dividends for the rest of my life. I only wish I hadn't waited as long as I did to do it. Honestly, I'd spent more time planning vacations than planning my life! I had some life goals, like

goal #102. But I wasn't living with the kind of intentionality it takes to turn possibilities into realities.

What are the *what if* moments in your life?

If you can't identify any in your past, it's time to create some in your present.