

If I Could
Do It
ALL OVER
Again

Jon Gauger



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IF I COULD DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN

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The sense of owing so much to so many is a humbling place to be. Thank you for sharing this journey with me.

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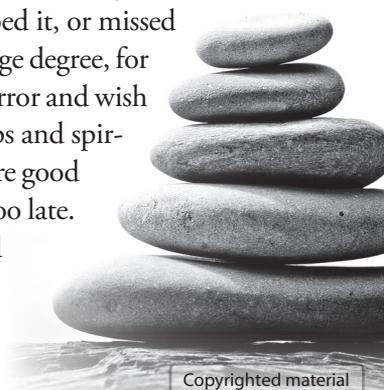
Foreword by Joni Eareckson Tada

We've all done it. Somewhere along the line, you look in the rearview mirror of your life and wonder, *If I were given the chance, would I go back and do things differently?*

It's a question I'm often asked, except with a twist. "Joni, if you had the choice of not taking that dive, would you?" I know what they're getting at. Although nearly 50 years of living in a wheelchair with quadriplegia has its challenges, I've grown so much closer to Jesus through it. My prayer life and love for God's Word have deepened, and I lead a thriving global ministry to people with disabilities. Would I trade it all for the chance to walk? Perhaps at one time I would have leaped at the chance to run, skip, and jump. But now, many years later? I see God's wisdom in allowing my diving accident to occur. And I am *happy* with it.

That is not to say I would not go back and do things differently. There are plenty of times I have flubbed it, or missed golden opportunities, such as earning my college degree, for one. Mostly, though, I look in my rearview mirror and wish I would have invested more in my relationships and spiritual disciplines. I regret I did not cultivate more good habits. Alas, for me in my late 60s, it may be too late.

Or is it? Second Peter 3:8 tells us that God



looks at each day as “a thousand years.” This means the Lord considers each day as our opportunity to invest in a thousand years’ worth of eternal blessings. So even if I only have weeks left on this planet, every 24-hour slice of time *counts*! It is not—it is *never*—too late to change things; to pursue a dream, work on relationships, start new disciplines, or clean up old habits. And this is why the book you hold in your hands is so powerful.

If I Could Do It All Over Again is your chance to hear from some of the world’s most respected and well-loved followers of Jesus, all of whom open their hearts to confess things they would have done differently...goals they wish they had pursued...or detours they regret taking. Their confessions provide sage advice and invaluable guidance for the reader. This book is your chance to learn from their misgivings and mistakes, as it were. As Job 32:7 says, “Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom” (NIV).

So flip the page and get started. And please, don’t plow through *If I Could Do It All Over Again* too quickly. Get to know the heart of each contributor. Read their lessons prayerfully and act on their counsel intentionally. Get to the root of what you can add or subtract from your life, so you can move forward with Christ and learn how to invest more wisely in the days God gives you. Be a better believer for having walked with each contributor. And the really good news is, you don’t have to break your neck to do it.

Joni Eareckson Tada

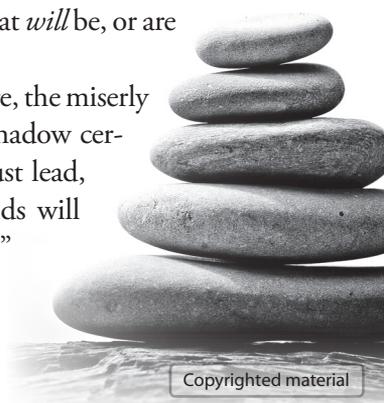
Joni and Friends International Disability Center
Agoura Hills, California

If Only I Had a Do Over

He was desperate, as few men ever are. Can you see him on his hands and knees, rocking back and forth? Hear his intense sobbing? Unearthly, really. Notice his fingers trembling as they trace the letters on the cemetery headstone beneath the creaking tree, his wide-eyed terror showing abhorrence at every touch. Now gaze upon his shoulders, sagging under the weight of his own wasteful life and behold the man: Ebenezer Scrooge. In literature or in pop culture, he has few equals for despair and regret.

If ever there was a man with an urgent need to do life over again, it was Ebenezer, the hard-hearted miser of *A Christmas Carol*. Dramatic life change evaded him until he was confronted by three ghostly visitors, each urging him to reverse his selfish ways. Even wrapped in the stilted words of Victorian English, Scrooge's climactic plea is wrenching: "Are these the shadows of things that *will* be, or are they shadows of things that *may* be, only?"

Pleading with the ghost of Christmas Future, the miserly Scrooge points out, "Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead, but if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"



In a word, what Scrooge was asking for—begging for—is nothing more or less than what most of us occasionally dream of: a do over.

Do Overs

From our earliest days to our last moments, there resides within us all a soulish hunger to do life over again. Whether it's the Little League game we blew as a kid or a mistake made in the big leagues of life, we want another shot at it—whatever “it” may be. Inherent in our desire is the certain belief that if we somehow could get that second opportunity, we would definitely do better.

When I traded in my old smartphone for an upgrade, one of the apps I most looked forward to reinstalling was a bowling game I'd grown to love. I worked long and hard for my 181 average, and I was sure that with all the experience I'd had playing, I would surely increase that average—big time—with a fresh start on the new phone.

Want to know what happened? I bowled terribly. I didn't up my game—I ruined it. I was worse off with the new phone than before. So much for second chances.

In golf, when you take a horrible swing and the ball goes haywire, you get a mulligan, a penalty-free stroke replayed from the previous spot of the ball. It's as if the previous rotten shot never happened in the first place.

But wish as we may, real life rarely affords us a mulligan of any kind. There's no such thing as a fresh install in our past. Yet the desire for a second go-around is sometimes still with us. This wistful yearning of ours to take a second shot, to go back and make things right, is reflected in thousands of books.

Back in 1733, Samuel Madden penned *Memoirs of the Twentieth*

Century. Its pages unfold the story of a guardian angel who travels back to 1728 with letters from 1997 and 1998. Imagine the possibilities for a do over!

Television's most successful science fiction series, now more than a half century in the running, is the British cult phenom known as *Dr. Who*. The premise of the show is based on a humble-looking time machine known as the TARDIS, which transports Dr. Who to problems all across the time line of humanity. A recurring theme of the show is that somebody is in search of a do over, either to repair or prevent a disaster.

When it comes to Hollywood, the idea of going back in time to effect some kind of do over has long been a fascination of directors and screenwriters. It would be easy to compile a long list of films around this theme. There's...

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

The Time Traveler's Wife

The Butterfly Effect

Back to the Future (1,2,3)

Midnight in Paris

Somewhere in Time

Time Bandits

What If

The Time Machine

Time Crimes

Timecop

Planet of the Apes

Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure

The Final Countdown

The Omega Man
Time After Time
Déjà vu
1984
Peggy Sue Got Married
Forever Young
The Terminator
The Philadelphia Experiment
Groundhog Day

What Christmas film has established more of a cult status than the beloved *It's a Wonderful Life*? When George Bailey is given a do over by way of a visit from his guardian angel, Clarence, his entire life is turned around. Instead of taking a suicidal jump off a bridge, he owns up to his challenges and embraces his life.

That's great for movies and books. But what about *real* life—yours and mine? I'm guessing you have one or two moments you wish you could do over. What's at the top of your list? If you could somehow repeat a scene or conversation, what's that singular moment that, with all your might, you wish you could somehow do over?

For me, it's not one thing, but many. Lots of my friends have a bucket list, but I keep a do over list. For instance, I would love to correct the disaster in junior high when we were playing flag football and a quarterback (who knew he was less than one second away from being pounded into the grass) threw to the only open receiver on the field—me. Grabbing the ball, I raced toward the end zone, virtually unopposed. It was only as I crossed the goal line that I finally understood the noise and yelling. I had run into my own end zone, scoring a nice touchdown for the *other* team! “Not such a big deal,” you say. Actually,

it was. That scene cast the mold of my unathleticism at an age in which doing well at sports meant the difference between thriving or dying in the junior high social world.

Then there was the halftime performance in high school when our marching band was executing all kinds of intricate formations out on the field. At a special moment in one particular song, all 96 of us were supposed to snap quickly around and march in the opposite direction (all of this captured on a movie camera up in the stands). I was the squad leader for our group of four, and I needed to pay extra close attention to the timing and execution of this maneuver. From the camera's vantage point high up in the press box, we musicians looked like a bunch of tiny but highly organized ants.

The movies were shown every Monday in band class as a visual report card on our weekend performance. These same images were shared at a special band concert at the end of football season, a sort of grand football farewell. There's a moment in this one particular movie where 92 ant-sized musicians flip around in one direction, while a squadron of four (my group) continue marching toward the wrong end zone! (Do you see a pattern here?) The only comedic relief was the sight of us four errant ants skittering to catch up with the other 92.

Of course, the older we get, the higher the stakes are, and the more serious our errors can become. The busy schedules of professional counselors, psychiatrists, and pastors offer further evidence of our hunger to redo scenes from our lives (or at least deal with the fallout from the fact that we can't). Trust me. I have plenty of adult-sized do overs I'd love to erase from my own list. I'm guessing you do too.

For some, do overs are big-ticket items: a divorce, a drunken spree, a fit of violence, flunking out of college, serving time in jail or at detox.

We wish these things were never, ever a part of our lives. Yet they are (forgiven, perhaps—but not without their natural consequences). Maybe your list is even darker. Or maybe it's much smaller (whatever *that* means—because in the end, all sin is equally sinful).

My contention is that with the passing of years, our greatest regrets may not be the big-ticket incidents—the major mess ups. Rather, I suspect most of us will come—like Scrooge—to regret the weight of the chain of *small* wrong decisions, *small* wrong attitudes we've indulged. In a moment of tender honesty, we might well confess to ourselves:

- I wish I had been more patient with my daughter/son/spouse.
- I wish I had spent less time at work. I gave my soul to the company rather than to my family.
- I wish I had played more with the kids. They're gone now and have little time for me.
- I wish I had been a bolder witness rather than hiding behind the excuse that I don't have the gift of evangelism.
- I wish I had treated my parents with more respect—more gratitude. Now that they are gone, I feel guilty.
- I wish I had not been so adamant about watching my favorite television shows or all the box office hits, having little or no passion for spiritual disciplines.
- I wish I had been as faithful in praying with the body of Christ as I was about giving my body a workout at the health club.
- I wish I had learned what it truly means to “rightly divide

the Word of God” —instead of being satisfied with a lifetime of haphazard chapter-a-day Bible readings.

- I wish I would have gone on that mission trip when I was younger. I wonder now how much it would have shaped the direction of my life.
- I wish I wouldn't have dabbled in online pornography. Though I'm not a hard-core user, I walk around feeling dirty and ashamed.

I wish, I wish, I wish...If only our poor choices were like movie scenes on a set that we could somehow do over. Alas, we cannot. In retrospect, small bad decisions no longer seem so small. Or so few. They add up. Apart from the freedom that comes from a truly biblical worldview, our regrets link together like an ugly chain.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's deceased business partner, Jacob Marley, appears before him, dragging a burden forged of rusty links. The clanking sounds accompany Marley's pitiful admission, "I wear the chain I forged in life...I made it link by link, and yard by yard."

What kind of chain are you lugging at this point in life? Just how long is it? How heavily does it weigh on you? We know that in Christ we are forgiven, yet we still hear the rattle of the chain. Is it possible our Christianity is warped?

Are you and I alone in this struggle? What about the leading Christian voices of our day? The Christian authors whom we read, the great musicians of our time, the pastors we hear on the radio...do they have regrets the same as we?

Do you ever wonder if famous Christians wish they could have a shot at a do over? After all, they are human like us. If so, what would

they choose if they could do life all over again? And if there's a way finally to be rid of those ugly chains, what can we learn from these folks?

These are the very questions we're about to explore. We talked with a representative sample of some of the more well-known Christians of our time to ask—bluntly—“What would you do over again?” Before we're finished, we'll take a careful look at what we should do with the do overs we long for—but will never have—along with those regrets that never seem to leave us.

Make no mistake. This is a thoughtful book on a weighty subject. But don't despair! I promise by the time you're through reading, you'll have renewed hope, fresh courage, and the freedom you've been seeking from past mistakes.

A Word About Our Interviews

In putting together this book, I sat with a couple dozen of the more recognized names in the evangelical world as we know it today. To be considered for an interview, the subject had to be at least 50 years old (we're looking for the wisdom that only comes with time).

The comments you read are excerpts from actual conversations I conducted. Some of these conversations took place face-to-face. Most were recorded over the phone. Nothing is made up. Nothing is massaged or sugarcoated. These are real people sharing honest answers to some tough questions.

As you read, you may well ask, “Why didn't he interview my favorite Christian football player...or favorite Christian actor...or favorite Christian author or politician?” The answer is, with only so much time and only so many resources to devote to the project, we had to draw the

line somewhere or this book could be thousands of pages long. And, to be frank, a few of the people we approached were simply uncomfortable addressing the kinds of questions we asked. So some of the names you may have hoped to see actually turned us down. Think of this book as a representative sample rather than an exhaustive collection of notable Christian voices.

That said, I hope you'll be touched by the sincerity and transparency you'll encounter. These are not easy issues to discuss in public. Perhaps, like me, you'll find yourself drawn as never before to the urgent encouragement in the imagery of Hebrews 12:1: "Such a large crowd of witnesses is all around us! So we must get rid of everything that slows us down, especially the sin that just won't let go. And we must be determined to run the race that is ahead of us" (CEV).

Let's allow the "crowd of witnesses" in this book to move us and motivate us toward a holier standard, a bolder witness, a larger faith, and a greater love for Christ. And as we commit to this journey, we may well join Tiny Tim in his invocation, "May God bless us—everyone!"

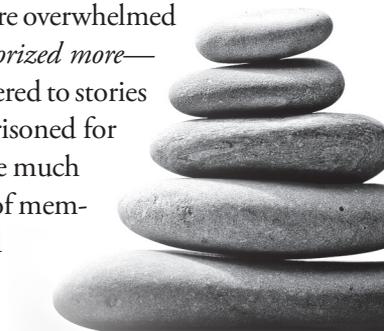
What I Would Do More Of

I can still feel the wooziness. After 21 hours in the air, my legs felt like Jell-O, and staring at the rotating luggage belt—vainly hoping to find my suitcase—didn't help. Factoring in waiting time for the three flights to Luanda, Angola, we'd been traveling for nearly 36 hours.

As former Moody Radio Pastor Donald Cole led us out of the airport, I had nothing but a tripod and video camera with me. My suitcase never arrived. No aspirin. No bug spray as a defense against malaria-infested mosquitoes or prescription medication to prevent the dreaded disease.

Naturally, I'd packed my Bible in that now-lost baggage, so my daily quiet time became reciting verses I'd learned through the years. At first, this was comforting—enjoyable. But it didn't take long to exhaust my store of mental references.

In the darkness of an African night, I lay there overwhelmed with the sobering thought, *I wish I had memorized more—and longer—Scripture passages*. My mind wandered to stories of the persecuted church. What if I were imprisoned for my faith? Wouldn't surviving such an ordeal be much more likely if I could readily access the power of memorized Scripture? There is something profound



about being confronted with that kind of loss. It shaped my life from that point on.

What about you? What if it were possible for you to repeat key scenes in your life? What would you choose to do *more* of?

For example, with the hindsight of years, I suspect most savvy investors would have put more money in select stocks they hadn't bought previously—maybe Microsoft. When the software company executed its initial public stock offering, a single share sold for \$21. Let's say that back then you chose to buy a hundred shares. Twenty-five years later, your investment would have ballooned into 28,000 shares during the course of nine stock splits and be worth about \$750,000. Could we somehow go back in time, we would surely invest more here (and in Apple Inc.!).

But what about other life arenas? What would you do more of—*much* more of—if you could do it all over again? It's interesting to hear what others have to say.



Tony Evans

I would spend more time with my children. As a father, I'm certainly happy with how my children are doing, but I would have given even more time to my fathering because I see where there were some gaps I could have filled with more strategic time spent with them. Plus, I would have traveled a little less.

Ravi Zacharias

I would take more time out for fun things. For enjoyment, sports, recreation, and exercise, time with family, and time with my wife. All of these come into play. I would see a more balanced life than the ministry sometimes allows you to have.

Gail MacDonald

I have reached a new understanding regarding the power of prayer, but I wish I had come to this knowledge before I got to be in my seventies. I've been enjoying it for the past ten years. There is something very mysterious about the power of prayer, and it takes a quiet soul to get there. I tend to be a doer, and all my life I've had to work really hard at being a "be-er."

Dee Brestin

I would teach my children more memory work. I would have them memorize things like the *Shorter Westminster Catechism*. I read a lot to them, but I would read even more to them. When speaking, I would have spoken less about myself and more about Christ, so that my listeners' hearts would melt and their lives be transformed.

Anne Graham Lotz

I would like to have spent more time with my children when they were little, getting more involved in their schools. Also, I wish I had called my mother more, especially toward the end of her life. I didn't call her

as much as I wish I had, and now I know the other side of that—how you long to hear from your children. Her life was full, but I wish I had talked to her more.

Michael Card

Clearly, I would have put in more time with my family. I think I was on the road doing 150 concerts a year for more than 30 years. My wife homeschooled our kids, so they received plenty of attention, and I would be home for two or three weeks at a time. I comforted myself by saying I was still spending more time with my children than my father, who was a doctor, ever spent with me because he was gone all the time. Yet my oldest son, Will, once took me aside in a non-condemning, sweet way and said, “I just need to tell you this. It was hard for you to be gone so much.” I think that’s one thing I would try to be wiser about.

POINT TO PONDER

Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,
the fruit of the womb is a reward.

PSALM 127:3

Gary Chapman

If I were looking back and asking where would I have spent more time, it would be in actually studying the Scriptures. As an associate pastor I regularly studied the Bible, and I consistently had a daily quiet time, but digging deeply into the Scriptures feeds the soul.

POINT TO PONDER

O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.

PSALM 119:97

June Hunt

What would have made a huge difference in my life would have been to learn much earlier not to be manipulated. I needed to be less controlled by others. What helped me the most was Galatians 1:10, “Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.” Once I saw that Scripture, it began a process of change in me. The Word of God convicted me that I was allowing others to have undue control over me. At times, that control violated what I really believed was right. I needed to change—and coming to grips with that was a huge turning point for me.

POINT TO PONDER

Pray without ceasing.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:17

Ron Hutchcraft

I would invest a lot more time praying. I came late to understanding the power of prayer because I’m a doer. I think to those of us who are doers and “make-it-happen” people, prayer feels as if it’s not

as powerful as planning and doing and promoting and pushing and working hard and having vision and goals. However, it's the connection to the power of God to do anything! I've concluded that the amount of times I pray a day, the fervency with which I pray, and the desperation with which I pray (not necessarily bowing my head and closing my eyes, but consciously connecting with God), are measures of my dependency on God. The relational side, the intimate side of connecting with Him through prayer throughout the day, has come late in my life. Certainly, I would do more praying.

Bob Moeller

I would have invested more time in my friendships. Many men are prone to being loners, to being people who live life in a more solitary way. I tell people, "If you're wondering what to do with your time, consider the 'nursing home test.'" The nursing home test is this: 30, 40, 50 years from now when I'm confined to a nursing home and can't live independently any longer, who is going to come to see me? Is it going to be my business clients? Is it the people I was trying to impress? Who is going to show up and actually feed me when I can't do that myself? It's probably going to be my family, my kids, my grandchildren, my dearest friends. So, I think those who are going to be with you for the long haul, to the very end, deserve the best of your attentions.

POINT TO PONDER

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

PROVERBS 17:17

Colin Smith

I wish I had settled core convictions of my ministry at an earlier stage of life. I'm very thankful for the theological education I had; it really taught me to think. But having been taught to think, I then had to settle through Scripture what I actually believed. In the early stages of ministry I found myself, at points, contradicting myself and my own preaching. I would see something from one text in the Bible and then see something different from another text, and I'd realize I was creating tension within my mind. What I needed was a more robust theological framework. If I had my time over again, I would pursue that at an earlier stage because it has been very significant for me.

Michael W. Smith

I'd invest more in people. When you're young, you're a little immature. You get excited about selling records, just getting a little selfish. I think if I had it to do all over again, I would invest more in loving on people and less in thinking about my desires and my comfort zone. Humility. Being more interested in the affairs of other people and what's going on. There's obviously not a lack of need. It's all around us. But it's amazing how you can become self-centered. I think I would have been much happier, and perhaps there would have been a lot more joy in my life, if I had learned earlier to love people for where they are at, being more concerned with their needs than my own.

George Verwer

I should have worked more on the area of patience and sins of the tongue. I thought I was working on this. I declared war on it and worked on it. But that's been my area of failure, where I've also hurt my wife at times. I'm just so quick to react.

Art Rorheim

I love sports—almost all of them. But I think of what God says in 2 Timothy 2:4, “No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.” I probably should have spent more time in my Bible and perhaps even more time memorizing Scripture, as much as I've loved it, and more time in prayer.

Joe Stowell

I would do more feeding of my soul. I wish I had taken more time—made time—(because we're all ultimately responsible for our own calendars) to read more. I would read more history, more biographies, more C.S. Lewis, more Muggeridge, a novel—to feed my soul and feed my mind. I find that as I look back, there's a shallowness that busyness creates. If I could do all of this again, I would take more time for meditation, just to sit for 20 minutes and say, “Lord, speak to me. Let me hear Your voice.” I would take more time to reverse the ultimate shallowness that busyness threatens to bring.

POINT TO PONDER

Give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons.

DEUTERONOMY 4:9

Erwin Lutzer

If I could do it all over again, I would spend an awful lot more time investing in the lives of my children. Of course we prayed with them and taught them and so forth, but in retrospect I really didn't enter into their world as I could have. One day my second daughter, Lynn, wrote me a letter when she was about to go into college. She said, "Dad, I cannot compete with your studies of Martin Luther and theology." Talk about an ice bucket experience! Sure, I was studying Martin Luther, and I was studying theology. But for my child to think that she couldn't compete with that? That so set me back that I began to change my priorities. I realized I was on the wrong track. If I could do it over again, I would invest more in the lives of my children.



Parting Thought

The suitcase containing my clothes and Bible never showed up in Africa—or anywhere. But that experience fueled a fire that continues to burn within me with regard to Bible memorization. I began

by creating a Scripture memory booklet. From there, I dove into the Psalms and memorized a dozen of those, and I'm still moving forward. Being middle-aged means I must commit to an aggressive schedule of maintenance and review of those passages or they disappear like the 10,000 neurons scientists claim my brain (and yours) loses every day.

Like you, and everybody we interviewed, I have a list of stuff I wish I'd done more of. The good news is that it's not too late to get to that list. God in His grace is using the loss in Africa to bring great gain to my life now. I'm convinced He can do the same for you too.