

Deep Regret • 2 Corinthians 7:10

There are lines from literature and cinema that become classics, remembered long after most are forgotten. One of those lines comes from the 1954 film *On the Waterfront* starring Marlon Brando. Brando plays the role of a prizefighter named Terry Malloy who is pressured by the crime mob to throw a fight he could easily have won. Sadly, the mob messenger is his own brother, Charlie. The decision to deliberately lose begins a downward spiral that ends Malloy's boxing career and connects him to organized crime.

Years later, Charlie comes back to Terry to pressure him again. This time he is asked to give perjured testimony in court. Their conversation in the back of a taxi goes back to the thrown boxing match years before. One line sums up the deep regret of a lifetime: "I could'a been a contender!"

There are a thousand other stories about deep regret that could be made into movies. Prisons are full of inmates who regret the crimes they committed or at least regret getting caught for what they did. Divorce courts too often hear the story of marriages people wish they had never entered. Regrets range from foolish financial investments to tragic medical procedures, from roads not taken to roads toward disaster.

Most deep regrets are filed under the heading If I Could Live Life Over Again. If we could edit our autobiographies we might change the schools we attended, the persons we married, the jobs we pursued and the choices we made.

Our English word "regret" partially comes from an old French word meaning "to weep". Regret is deep sorrow that returns us to tears again and again. It may be over something we did or something done to us. Either way the sorrow does not go away.

Deep regrets are only partially about the moment of past decision. They linger because of their lasting consequences. Regrets are recharged every day by the new pain that comes from yesterday's choices and consequences. Our lives are forever

changed from what they could have been and should have been—and there's no going back!

Everyone has regrets. Even God. Filled with love and hope and dreams, God created humankind. It was a match made in heaven. We were designed to be like God, created in his likeness. Despite all of God's love and generosity his human children turned against him in sin and broke the heart of God. We read in Genesis 6:5-6:

The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.

God's first inclination was to terminate the human race and start all over again. That is a common response to deep regret. Instead, God allowed humanity to survive and God still lives with the consequences of his children's "*wickedness on the earth.*"

We all have regrets although not all regrets receive the same rating. One person's regret is over a minor mistake while another's regret is over a murder. Some regrets are over deliberate sins and others are over ignorant mistakes. We have all said things we wish we had not said. Sometimes they did not even represent what we really think but the words have taken on a life of their own and a thousand apologies and corrections

can't undo the damage done. Many of us made choices that seemed right at the time but turned into disaster. If we only knew then what we know now we would have decided and behaved in a totally different manner.

Some regrets started with a split second of poor choice. There is a radio public service ad that broadcasts a conversation among young adults talking about foolish things they did while drunk. One tells about wearing his underwear on his head, another tells about pulling a tablecloth and crashing the dishes, a third tells about going home from a party with a stranger and becoming infected with the AIDS virus. One moment of foolishness leaves a

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lifetime of regret.

Smaller or greater we all have regrets. And, if you claim to be the rare exception that has lived a totally regret-free life, you need to know that the longer you live the higher your probability of some future deep regret.

There are a million possible responses to our regrets but no one can change yesterday. Not even God. Maybe we can make repairs, remedies or restitution but we cannot rewrite yesterday. What was said was said. What happened did happen. There is no going back.

Recognition that we cannot change the past is an important and necessary step toward dealing with yesterday. We reach a point where it is counterproductive to rehearse what happened over and over in our minds. There is no point in wondering how life would have been different if yesterday had not happened.

The reality is that our past is always part of our present. It's like your birth date. You may prefer to have been born in another month or a different year or under alternate circumstances but you cannot. Your birth date is when it is and it is part of what makes you who you are.

Remember some of the Bible biographies. Moses regretted his disobedience of God that prohibited him from leading Israel into the Promised Land. David regretted his adultery. Peter regretted his denial of Jesus. Thomas regretted his doubts. In every case they moved on with life and made future choices knowing that they could not delete or edit their history. We must deal with our yesterdays by acknowledging who we are and then live the life we have for God—from now on.

I heard about a New York rabbi who said, "At the end of your life God will not ask you why you weren't Moses. He will ask you why you weren't you." Who we are includes when we were born, all of our gifts, great successes and deep regrets. God invites us to live for him in our skins and our stories. Everyone has regrets. No one can change yesterday. But we do have a choice about tomorrow.

There is a godly approach to sorrow and a worldly approach to sorrow. Christians are called to a godly response. However, those around us who don't know about the godly option would push us toward a worldly approach.

We read in II Corinthians 7:10 that "*Godly sor-*

row brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."

Godly sorrow seeks to please God and brings repentance (behavioral change). The result is salvation and release from regret. Worldly sorrow centers on self and is expressed in resentment and blame. It's a killer.

Here's the difference. Some people bring God into their sorrow. Godly sorrow learns from mistakes, seeks forgiveness and trusts God to deal with the past and lead us into the future. While this is mostly rooted in our relationship with God it is obedient to do whatever God asks of us to deal with the regret.

Some people leave God out of their sorrow. They choose to be bitter, blaming and resentful. They refuse to forgive others and will not forgive themselves. Their regret poisons their souls and destroys their lives.

We each must choose. Will we deal with deep regret God's way or the world's way? God's way may not be easy. When you have been robbed or raped, when your husband or wife has betrayed you, when you have lost everything because of a one-minute mistake, it takes enormous faith and courage to forgive and do what is right.

God's way is often a process. Deep regret rarely goes away with a single treatment. We need to keep coming back to Jesus for more counsel, repeated confession, fresh forgiveness and step-by-step healing.

The critical choice is this: Will we allow yesterday's regret to grow us or grieve us? Will we change toward good or slowly die from remorse? When we go to God with our deep regret he begins to renew us. He uses different approaches with different people and circumstances.

Joseph's brothers, in the beginning of the Bible, sold him into slavery. As a slave he worked hard and did everything right. Because of the unfulfilled lust of his master's wife Joseph ended up in prison for a crime he did not commit. He had a lot to regret and plenty of cause for resentment. Yet God used the bad events in Joseph's life to bring him to a position of political prominence and power that saved his own family from starvation. God turned evil into good.

Joseph's response to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 indicates his godly approach to deep regret

when he said, “*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*” It took years but Joseph’s horror was gloriously transformed from defeat to victory.

Paul was a different story. He was more like me and maybe like you. He was a work in progress. He had plenty to regret. He pursued, persecuted, imprisoned and murdered Christians. Even after he became a Christian those memories must have haunted him. Besides, he was such a passionate person that he often acted on impulse and generated critics wherever he went.

Here’s what he wrote in Philippians 3:12-14:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Paul’s regrets did not instantly heal. It took him a lifetime. The way he dealt with his yesterdays was to focus on the calling of Jesus Christ in his life. The way he forgot about yesterday was to focus on tomorrow. Instead of looking back to what he regretted he looked forward to doing what Jesus called him to do for the rest of his life.

Let’s apply Paul’s principle to our regret. You are who you are. Your history is your history. Now, what are you going to do with the rest of your life? What is the call of Jesus that is uniquely yours? Will you be you and do what God wants you to do? If the answer is “yes” God will renew you, heal your regrets and you will win the prize God has waiting for you.

“Zeigarnik effect” is a psychological concept I don’t pretend to fully understand. It attempts to explain why we tend to remember our failures more than our successes. The idea is that our brains usually file away our completed tasks but keep incomplete tasks fresh on our minds.

Deep regrets often remain as incomplete files on the desktops of our minds. We keep them open

to read and reread, somehow hoping to change the last page, finish the file and close it forever. But it doesn’t work. To the contrary, those constant reviews agitate and upset, causing frustration and resentment.

Then comes Jesus. He tells us that because we are Christians we can trust the file to him. He will not erase it but he will work its jagged edges into our future biographies for good. He asks us to change our minds about the regrets, to seek and accept forgiveness and (most of all) to trust him for the present and future.

Here is Jesus’ challenge to those of us with deep regrets—TRUST HIM! Trust

him to turn regret into renewal. Trust him that life no longer needs to be defined by yesterday’s regret but can be shaped by today’s trust. Romans 8:31-32 and 28 tell us:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

The question is clear: “*What, then, shall we say in response to this?*” May our answer be just as clear: “*If God is for us, who can be against us? We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*”

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