

How should a Christian respond to regret?

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A few weeks ago Britain's Zharnel Hughes was lined up for the championship race of the Men's 100m in the Tokyo Olympics. It was the race that would determine who was the fastest man in the world. The runners took their places. On your mark, get set, go! The only problem was that Zharnel Hughes had started early. All the runners had to stop and retake their places in the blocks and Zharnel Hughes was shown a red card and was disqualified from the race. Years of practice. Countless other races to arrive at this point, and in a moment His dream was gone. Oh, the regret of a mistake made.

We all have regrets. Some were minor. Some were life-changing enough that we still are affected by them today. But praise be to God that He can make all things new. He is our God who redeems even the worst of mistakes and can use them for good. That is what we will be focusing on in today's worship service: How God can redeem even our mistakes and regrets. May we humble ourselves today and find redemption in Him. Let's pray.

If you could change one thing that has happened in your life, what would it be? Something you said, something you did? A relationship, a financial decision, a time you sinned against another?

Do you have regrets? What could have been done differently? When we think of our regrets we are tempted to fall back into self-pity, self-condemnation, bitterness, humiliation, defeat, futility, or to become contented with less than what God has planned for us. But thank God that He is our Redeemer and Reconciler. He is the God who makes all things new. You may not think there is anything that can be done to make right the regrets that you have, but in the book of Joel we find a story that gives us hope.

In the book of Joel, we read how the land of God's people was devastated by locusts. Joel 1:4,10-12 describes the damage this way:

"What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. (...)

¹⁰ The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil languishes. ¹¹ Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. ¹² The vine dries up; the fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man.”

For Joel’s agricultural society it was a picture of utter destruction. As we read further, we see that they had brought it upon themselves. They had turned away from God and as an act of love God had sent swarms of locusts to devastate the land.

After the locusts had passed God called to His people to return to Him. In Joel 2:12-13, God speaks these words:

“‘Even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.”

In Joel’s culture it was common to tear or rend one’s robe when you were sorry or mourning. It was an outward way to show of your sadness. God, speaking through Joel, took it one step further. It was not enough to tear the robes they were wearing. God is calling for a tearing or brokenness in their hearts. God calls them to repent and turn back to Him.

Step one was God’s discipline. Step two was God’s call to repentance. Step three was God’s promise to make things right. After listing how He would restore everything, He ends it with Joel 2:25:

“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.”

It was God’s beautiful promise of making up for the past. He would now redeem the time that had been lost. Although this verse was focusing on the damage the locusts had brought, we see this idea of God redeeming the past continue even into the New Testament.

What are your locusts? Do you have something in your past that has devoured precious years, relationships, or opportunities? Can you think of things that you have done that seemed to have robbed you from the best God had for you? Have there been issues even in your character that have tainted your past?

God comes to us today as the redeeming God. The reconciling God. God promises to work all things for the good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

We have a choice what to do with our regrets. We can be enslaved by them, or we can let God somehow use them for His glory. Our regrets will either move us closer to God, or farther away from Him. Scripture is filled with stories of God taking imperfect people with regrets and doing incredible things in and through their lives, but it depended on how they responded to their past.

Peter and Judas both betrayed Jesus. Judas allowed his betrayal to chase him away from God. In response he took his own life. Peter let his betrayal and guilt turn him towards God and he was restored. Even though he had made mistakes, we see in the book of Acts that Peter led many people to salvation in Christ and became one of the leaders of the early church in Jerusalem.

At the crucifixion we saw two thieves being crucified next to Jesus. Both had committed crimes. One's heart was hardened to Christ. The other allows his past mistakes to move him towards Christ. One curses Christ, the other believes and gains eternity.

We also see God's redemption in the life of Rahab. She was a prostitute, living in Jericho. But by faith she hid the Jewish spies and was eventually saved. God took her life of sin and redeemed her. So much so, that scripture shows that she was the mother of Boaz, who married Ruth. That same family line, flowing through Rahab, would eventually bring about the birth of Joseph, the husband of Mary, Jesus' mother.

We see redemption in the life of Matthew as well. He was a hated tax collector, working for the Romans, but he left everything to follow Jesus. Eventually he was even used to write one of the gospels of the New Testament.

In the book of Exodus, we read that Moses murdered a man and fled into the wilderness to save his own life. He had been raised in the palace of Pharaoh, with a bright future ahead of him, but because of his mistake he spent the next 40 years as a shepherd, caring for sheep out in the desert wilderness. How many times must he have regretted his mistake, feeling that all had been lost? It was then that Yahweh God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, reinstating him and renewing God's call for Moses to free the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. God used Moses' upbringing in Pharaoh's palace to prepare him to deal with pharaoh and be prepared to lead the people. God used the time of caring for the sheep to humble Moses and familiarize him with the same wilderness through which he would lead the nation of Israel. God wasted nothing. All things, even his mistakes, were used for God's purposes.

In each of these stories, it was not their past that determined their nearness to God. It was their response to their past. Romans 3:23 tells us that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. As we seek to follow God, we all will have regrets, but how will we respond?

Life with Jesus Christ gives us a new opportunity. The past no longer has power over us. Our mistakes might have been painful or even devastating, but scripture clearly teaches that we are given a new life in Christ. We are no longer slaves to the past. We now have access to healing, forgiveness, and a new life.

2 Corinthians 5:17 says, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"***

Romans 6:4 shares the same idea: ***"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."***

Some would argue that whoever wrote these words was not familiar with the pain and regret of life, but we must remember that the Apostle Paul wrote these words.

His past was littered with regret. So much so that he continued to mention it throughout his letters. Paul had been a Jewish Pharisee who had passionately persecuted the Christians. He, with others, arrested Christians and some were even put to death for their faith. He had sought to destroy the church (Acts 9:1ff; Galatians 1:13; 1 Timothy 1:13). How many times was he still haunted by the memories of their faces or the sound of their cries?

In Ephesians 3:8, Paul referred to himself as *“the least of all the saints”*. In 1 Corinthians 15:9, Paul writes, *“For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”* In 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul still refers to himself as the *“chief of sinners”*. Paul’s life had been redeemed, but he never forgot the size of grace that it took to cover over his multitudes of sins. It was this Amazing Grace that compelled Paul to keep preaching to all who were enslaved by their sin and regret.

All believers can have the confidence that even in the midst of our regrets God will work in and through us for our good and His glory.

Can you remember how we used to find our way around before we had the GPS? Maps, written instructions, confusion. Can you imagine trying to find an address on one of the small streets in the center of Madrid without a GPS?

God’s working in the midst of our regrets is like a GPS. There is a final destination. God is working to make us like Jesus. He is making us holy. In the midst of that journey, we, imperfect people, make mistakes, just like missing a turn when following a GPS. What does the GPS do? It recalibrates. It adjusts and now gives us a new route. It might take longer, or be more confusing, or be delayed by construction or a traffic accident, but it still will guide us to our final destination. It is similar to how God works with us. Our mistakes might leave scars, bring consequences, or close doors for us, but for those who are His, God will do what is necessary to still bring us to our final destination. It may lead us to a life that we never expected, but we can be confident that God will finish what He started in our lives. If we will surrender our regrets to Him, He will work in and through our lives to use our regrets for our good and His glory.

One example of this is the story of Chuck Colson. He was a lawyer who became the special counsel to Richard Nixon, the president of the United States, back in 1969. He was ruthless against any politicians that opposed President Nixon. It was so bad that eventually Colson was sent to prison for his activities.

He was disbarred, and to most it would appear that his mistakes had finally ruined his life. But God was not finished with him yet. Right before Colson was sentenced to prison, a business colleague of his witnessed to him from the Bible and from *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. Very soon after, Colson humbled himself before God and put his trust in Jesus Christ.

During his time in prison God gave Colson a heart for the horrible situation in the prison system. Because of this, after his release Colson began Prison Fellowship International that now works to bring about prison reform and ministers to prisoners and their families in over 120 countries.

When you read Colson's testimony he truly regretted his past mistakes, but God turned his regret into a blessing. God can do the same for us as well.

We can either fix our eyes on our regrets and live in defeat and self-condemnation, or we can fix our eyes on Jesus and trust Him to use our regrets for our good and His glory.

If we view our regrets without Christ by our side, we will likely be led into lies instead of the truth. This will lead us to say things like, "God can't love me because of what I have done. God can't use me because what I have done. God can't forgive because what I have done. I will never be able to be close to God because what I have done." But none of those things are true for a believer who repents and humbles themselves before God. That is the amazing thing about God's grace. For all who repent and believe, they will be forgiven and brought near.

If we only try to understand our regrets from our viewpoint, we will never get it right. We can't know the truth about our past until we have heard God's perspective on it. As Joseph said to his brothers who had sold him into slavery years before, ***"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done"*** (Gen. 50:20). From a human perspective, Joseph's life had been very difficult, but from the perspective of heaven, God had been working in it all along.

God's perspective is essential when thinking of our regrets. With this in mind we must ask two questions. First of all, what in our past does God view as regretful? Secondly, how does God want to use our regrets for our good and His glory?

In our lives there are many regrets that are connected to our sinful and selfish decisions of the past. God would agree that they were regretful. But at other times we label something as regretful, and God does not agree. We regret just because it is difficult. For example, maybe one passes through a difficult time of marriage or of work and they begin to regret their choice of spouse or the fact that they accepted the job. In the moment they regret it because they want pain free living, while at the same time God is not regretting the situation because He is using their difficulties to usher them into a greater dependence on God and a greater love for each other.

The regret we are referring to today is the regret that we have brought upon ourselves because of sin. For those who are able to accept responsibility and blame for their regret and confess it and surrender it to God, He can use it for their good and His glory.

Difficult times of regret can lead us to experience God like never before as the Healer, the Provider, the Forgiver, or the Sustainer. Our regrets can then be a source of testimony for the glory of God. People can watch our lives and say things like, "How did you endure? How did you rise up above your regret?" As we trust in God our response will give credit to God and how He has worked in our lives.

Our regrets can also be a source of ministry to others. For example, one who has experienced an abortion can minister to others who are considering abortions. One couple who experienced marriage problems can now minister to others who are passing through the same. Those who have gone through addictions or seasons of worldly living can share wisdom from their experience. Through regret God can work a humility and compassion in us that can be used to minister to others.

That verse in Joel 2:25 still amazes me. That in the midst of our sinful regrets God would still say, *"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten."* That God would somehow salvage our story, recalibrate our directions and still use our regret for our good and His glory.

As we bring our regret to the foot of the cross, knowing that Jesus has already paid it all, we can overcome. In the midst of our sins, our scars, our disappointment and our lost opportunities, God can take our brokenness in His hands and once again show us to be His treasure.

I would like to conclude by sharing these words from a song:

*Well, it was battered and scarred and the auctioneer felt it was hardly worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin but he held it up with a smile.
"It sure ain't much, But it's all we got left I guess we ought to sell it too,
Now who'll start the bid on this old violin. Just one more and we'll be through."*

And then he cried, "One, give me one dollar. Who'll make it two. Only two dollars. Who'll make it three.

*Three dollars twice, now that's a good price. But who's got a bid for me.
Raise up your hand. Don't wait any longer. The auction's about to end
Who's got four. Just one dollar more to bid on this old violin.*

*Well the air was hot and the people stood 'round as the sun was setting low
From the back of the crowd a gray-haired man came forward, and picked up the bow.
He wiped the dust from the old violin and tightened up the strings
Then he played out a melody pure and sweet, sweeter than the angels sing.*

*And then the music stopped and the auctioneer with a voice that was quiet and low
He said, "What am I bid for this old violin, then he held it up with a bow."*

Then he cried out, "One, give me one thousand, who'll make it two, only two thousand, who'll make it three.

*Three thousand twice, well, that's a good price, but who's got a bid for me.
The people cried out, "What made the change? We don't understand."
Then the auctioneer stopped and he said with a smile, "It was the touch of the master's hand."*

*Now you know many a man with a life out of tune is battered and scarred with sin
And he's auctioned cheap to a thankless world much like that old violin.*

*Then the master comes and the foolish crowd, they never understand
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought, just by one touch of the Master's hand. ¹*

Discussion questions:

1. What from this sermon was most interesting to you?
2. What types of regrets do you think are most common in the lives of people today?
3. Without God's help, what do you think regrets can do to a person's life?
4. What can we learn from God's words in Joel 2:25: *"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten."*
5. Why is God's perspective so important when we are dealing with our sinful regret of the past?
6. How should a Christian respond to regret?
7. What do you need to remember from this sermon?
8. What do you think God wants you to do in response to this sermon?

¹ <https://www.lyricsbox.com/wayne-watson-the-touch-of-the-master-s-hand-lyrics-hc4zs5s.html>