

## Regrets – An Overlooked Problem?

*'Non, je ne regrette rien'*. So sang Edith Piaf back in the 1960s. Frank Sinatra also had a similar perception in his popular song 'My Way' in which he sings, 'Regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention'. If what they sang reflects what they actually experienced, then Piaf and Sinatra are very unusual. Indeed, you have to say they show an attitude to life's disappointments and failures that is very self-satisfied and self-justifying. And that comes through in Sinatra's song where he goes on to sing, 'I did what I had to do, and saw it through without exemption.' Of course, these are just the words of two songs which have been very popular. But they are interesting in that they express one approach to what is a very common, but rarely discussed problem for people – regrets.

Most people have regrets about things that have happened in their lives. Regret is both a feeling and a way of thinking where one dwells on or constantly replays some incident from the past, recent or long ago. The range of things that create regrets are extremely varied, from events that cannot be controlled, through disappointments, losses, broken relationships and family disputes. Personal failures and wrong choices may include things done and things left undone; disappointments may include things that happened or those longed-for things that never materialised.

Regrets may serve a positive end, but usually they are disturbing and can be very destructive. They can strike at every age and stage of life, but they are in some ways especially an issue in later life. Indeed, they can become a significant problem as people get older and have more time to reflect on life.

Dwelling on the past in this way can become a major hindrance to enjoying life, the ability to serve others... and readiness to die. The sense of guilt that may arise from dwelling on past events can be emotionally and spiritually debilitating. The remembrance of some things may induce great shame and distress, while others can leave one feeling empty and deeply sad; others memories bring back grief and deep feelings of pain and frustration.

Judging by my own experience of older people, and through talking with others who minister to this age group, it is clear that this is a fairly widespread problem. Let me illustrate: I was recently speaking to a group of about sixty older people on this theme and the Bible's response. At the close of the meeting I was surprised to find that almost everybody present said that I had described their own experience. A small number indicated that certain regrets filled their minds much of the time and robbed them of their joy in Christ. Those who minister to the dying will know that some will want to talk about past events that trouble them. I could give more anecdotes to show that this is a real issue and more frequent than we often think. It makes the absence of preaching and teaching on this theme rather surprising.

There is a real and profound difference between the Christian and the unbeliever. For a non-Christian, recurring and disturbing regrets may be an evidence of a troubled conscience. We can all recall some who have known deep conviction of sin and their regrets have become quite overwhelming. This can sometimes be an opportunity to bring the hope and comfort of the gospel. To then see such older people find peace is a joy and delight. Paul calls this experience of regret that leads to salvation 'godly sorrow' in 2 Corinthians 7:10. However, worldly people's regrets are utterly destructive because they have no sense of the glorious forgiveness of Christ.

On the other hand, for believers the recalling of past sins should only be in order to magnify the grace of God, rather than 'beat themselves up' because of their unworthiness. For them, regrets can be the memory of sins for which forgiveness has been found through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, or events and circumstances that Providence has subsequently overruled, sometimes in the most glorious way (1 Timothy 1:12-14). So, the recurrence of such memories must be answered with the Word of God and total reliance on God's promises to his children.

Paul is clearly referring to this, at least in part, in Philippians 3:

*But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (vv13-14).*

‘Forgetting those things which are behind’ is a daunting task and one with which we often struggle. That is undoubtedly why Paul adds, ‘reaching forward to those things which are ahead’. A clear focus on service for God and an anticipation of the blessings that are stored up in future for us leave little opportunity for the past to thrust itself into our minds for long. But that is the very reason why in later life regrets can become more prominent. There is more time to muse excessively on the things that are past and less opportunity for activity, especially if the limitations of age inhibit such.

A good thing to do in these circumstances is to follow the hymnwriter’s example:

*I muse on the things that are past,  
wherein my defence Thou hast proved.  
Nor wilt thou relinquish at last,  
a sinner so signally loved.*

(‘A Sovereign Protector I Have’, Augustus Toplady, 1740-78)

Redirecting thought onto the triumphs of grace in our lives is a powerful tool against destructive regrets.

The objective reality of forgiveness through faith in the finished work of Christ and the personal enjoyment of the assurance of that forgiveness may not always coincide. Tender pastoral care is needed to help those who struggle to find a clearer view of the reality of grace and fix itself in the heart and mind. However, for some there this will be a life-long battle, so that though they are real believers, they will journey to heaven with a faltering gait, in need of regular spiritual medicine to heal the troubled soul’s recurring ‘fainting fits’. Part of the reason for writing this article is to encourage those who minister to older people to address this issue in a tender and sympathetic way, but also in a way that emphasises the glory of the redeeming work of Christ.

In addition, there can be no doubt that the Lord sometimes uses regret to provoke his people to righteousness when they have been behaving foolishly or been neglectful of duties as his people. Dave (not his real name) was a godly and effective minister of the gospel for many years. But in his last days he became very agitated by regret over his own conduct some years previously. Some people in a church he was pastoring had caused an unnecessary split in the congregation. He had stood for what was right but had been a little over-zealous and harsh in his response to the trouble-makers. This had disturbed him, but he had locked it away in the back of his mind. Occasionally it would reappear, but he always pushed it away and got on with the things he had to do. Now at the end of his days he was constantly troubled by the memory, wishing he had behaved better, and that he had sought reconciliation earlier. He shared the matter with his pastor and though not well enough himself to do so, asked him to write to the men involved asking for pardon and reconciliation. He read and approved the letters the pastor produced. Replies were received quite quickly in which each person acknowledged their own wrong and asked for his forgiveness. Meetings took place and there was true reconciliation. After that Dave’s final days were truly precious, and in them he knew such overwhelming peace and joy in Christ.

It must also be observed that sometimes regret may be misguided, based on a false or confused interpretation of events due to illness or stress. The experience of Job illustrates this powerfully (see, for example, Job 3:3 & 11). He regretted that he was ever born, but that was because of the awful things that had happened to him and his own physical pain. When he subsequently saw his life’s events in the light of the greatness of God (Job 42), he lost his regrets and gained both clarity of understanding and a wonderful restoration of blessing. This reminds us that it may be necessary in helping someone with regrets to ascertain the truth about some of the things that are being regretted. Gentle and sympathetic correction of misunderstanding may need to follow.

Finally, it may be helpful to note the difference between regret, remorse and conviction of sin. Regret, as we have seen, is essentially just recalling past failures and bad events. They may be just passing memories, or they can be things that are nurtured by self-pity and so become destructive. Remorse is a more intense

feeling; the word comes from a root that means 'to bite', and remorse does just that. It may well lead onto change in life and values. Judas and Peter are examples of remorse, but the outcomes were very different in their cases: Judas' remorse prompted his suicide, while Peter's led to tears, repentance and ultimately restoration. Remorse can be the outcome of regret but that is not always the case. Conviction of sin is more than remorse; according to Jesus in John 16:5-11, it is the work of the Holy Spirit. And when he comes in this way, he often brings people to Christ. So, these three things may go together – regret leads to remorse, remorse leads to conviction of sin and repentance. But often they are separate.

Loss of peace and joy, the restriction and hindrance of spiritual life, and the diminution of hope – these are the sad impact of regrets that are not dealt with. Too many believers in their last years feel this pain and sorrow. Surely this is what David was speaking about in Psalm 6:

*I am worn out from my groaning.  
All night long I flood my bed with weeping  
and drench my couch with tears.  
My eyes grow weak with sorrow;  
they fail because of all my foes. (vv6-7)*

But older Christians, being of the generation they are, often say nothing because they are not accustomed to sharing personal emotions and concerns; they are embarrassed to do so, and may end up feeling that no-one else experiences these things.

The Scripture quoted in this article show that there is a biblical answer to regret and clear examples of godly people who experienced such issues (many other references could be given). It is therefore incumbent on those of us who seek to minister to older people to take the opportunity to raise this matter in a caring and careful way, and then to apply the balm of Scripture.

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