

The Good and Bad of Regret

By T. Sean Sullivan

There are many human emotions. There are some that we build up, such as kindness, love, and devotion. There are some that we seek, such as cheerfulness, joy, and happiness. There are some that we must control, such as fear, jealousy, envy, and anger.

Among our emotions is another that we usually strive to avoid; that is regret. It would be nice to live in such a way that there is not one misstep to ever regret. But, we know that would be wishful thinking in this life.

Regret is a strong emotional reaction, and we are emotional beings! All the decision making forces within the human mind are subject to our emotional input. We are often driven more by emotions than either by our will or our intellect.

Let's consider the good and the bad of regret from the perspective of God's word. Many see this emotion as purely bad; however let's also see if there is anything to be gained from this emotional experience; perhaps in our decision making processes.

What Regret Is

By definition, regret is to feel sorry and sad about something previously done or said that now appears wrong, mistaken, or hurtful to others (Encarta English Dictionary). We also use some similar words in this same sense: remorse, guilt, compunction, or even the phrase "pang of conscience".

It usually doesn't take long in this life to become acquainted with regret. Regret is mental distress, and some studies suggest that it leads to physical ailments like lowering our immune system to even a poor sense of well-being. Knowing that the Bible records, the actions of real people, like us, we know that there have been some who experienced regret. Let's look at some examples.

The "Prodigal Son" discovered regret in Luke 15:11-32. He made improper choices in his life, leaving the structure of home and seeking a care-free wild life (vs. 12-16). When the fun was all drained away he was able to see the negative results of those choices and he regretted his decision (v. 17).

The Apostle Peter discovered regret in Matthew 26:69-75. Peter was notably outspoken; this characteristic made him a prime candidate for saying something he might regret (Let every man be "slow to speak"—James 1:19-20). In his boasting, Peter proclaimed that he would never forsake Jesus and just a few hours later he vehemently denied the Lord (Matt. 26:69-74). Right then, almost as soon as the words left his mouth (the third time), his heart sank with regret, realizing what he had just done (Matt. 26:75; Luke 22:61-62).

Certainly the Apostle Paul was familiar with regret. Paul was an aggressive enemy to the cause of Christ (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2). We clearly see that after Paul became a Christian, Paul regretted his previous destructive ways (Acts 26:9-11).

Regret is a powerful emotion that grips the heart and burns the conscience. To most, that have experienced its hold, it is something to avoid.

The Bad Side of Regret

The "bad side" of regret is the feeling it brings, but even more it is what we have done that leads to the regret. From the perspective of this lesson, most, if not all, regrettable actions are sinful actions. Earlier, we look at the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). We quickly learned that his chosen way of living is sinful and destructive to one's self/one's soul. His sinful pathway resulted in loneliness, hunger, homelessness and regret. We also considered the Apostle Peter (Matt. 26:69-75). We witnessed him crumble as his pride gave away to fear (Matt. 26:70, 72, 74), and his fear resulted in guilt, shame, and regret (Matt. 26:75). The Apostle Paul was also in

our thoughts (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2). We watched as Paul aggressively pursued Christians to destroy them (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2). But we were also able to see him being confronted with truth. Paul was left filled with regret.

Sin can leave us in regret too! When we understand what we have done (Rom. 3:23; James 1:13-15), we will have regret. When we understand where we are, in sin, we will have regret (Rom. 6:16). It is at this place when we are filled with inner-turmoil and guilt and it is this place that no one likes to be. In regret, we find ourselves withdrawn from life around us and in a state of shame. No one is envious of this place, but maybe we should be.

The Good Side of Regret

Can there be a “good side” to all of this sin-caused regret? Is there something good to be gained from being introspective and ashamed of what we have done? Yes.

Consider what Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 7:2, “Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart.” And again in Ecclesiastes 7:4, “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” The same reality that makes these statements about mourning true also sees the worth of regret.

The “good side” of regret is that only in the realization of fault can we be led to repentance. In Acts 2, when the people were rapt with regret, Peter commanded them to make their lives right before God; to “repent and be baptized—for the remission of their sins” (Acts 2:38-39). Paul records God’s word on this subject in 2Corinthians 7:9-10, where Paul says, “I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance... for godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation”.

The “good side” of regret is also that it is a temporal situation that teaches an eternal lesson. Regret is something that we learn to avoid and we avoid it by doing better today than we did yesterday.

With that goal in mind, what about when the opportunity to change is no longer present? How much more should we strive to avoid regret in eternity? If we keep procrastinating, postponing, or ignoring what we need to do to be saved in this life, we may run out of time. Then we will live in eternal regret, knowing that we could have avoided the condemnation we are in.

Conclusion

Humans are emotional beings. Emotions are an important part of our reasoning ability. Regret is an emotional state that we like to avoid. However, it is important to gain its perspective of our faults. It is important to use it toward repentance and salvation. It is certainly important to learn its lesson now, before we face it in eternity.

Have you done regrettable things? The opportunity to remedy your heart is available now through Jesus Christ. Come to Jesus with your burden of regret and seeking His hope, right now. Obey now, before it becomes too late.