



REGRETS, REALITY, RESTORATION

by Reverend Wayne Palmer

You probably know guys who are bold, strong-headed, quick to speak, and slow to think. That describes one of Jesus' followers named Peter. His reckless overconfidence put him in a dangerous place.

The Bible records that he had watched soldiers arrest Jesus, his Teacher. Though the rest of his companions fled into the night, Peter followed in the shadows as they led Jesus off to the house of the Jewish high priest where a highly irregular court was gathering for the purpose of finding a way to accuse Jesus of a crime worthy of death.

With the help of his friend John, whose family was known to the high priest, Peter gained entrance to the courtyard outside and stood with the soldiers waiting to see how the trial would turn out (see John 18:15-16).

The wood sizzled, popping and cracking as sparks rose high into the air. The charcoal fire cast ominous, menacing shadows on the courtyard walls. Peter felt like they were closing in around him. He risked a sidelong glance at the guards who stood around him, warming themselves. A moment ago it had seemed like a good idea to hide among them until he could learn the outcome of the trial inside. Now he wished he had run away with Jesus' other followers.

Peter inhaled the pungent smoke as tried to lose himself in the flames. He was startled by a flash of light that caught his eye—the firelight glinting off the sword hanging from a soldier's waist. He reached down to feel the borrowed sword tucked safely into its sheath at his side. He inhaled sharply as he realized a servant girl was using that same firelight to inspect his face.

She turned to the others and said, "This man also was with Him."

He firmly denied it, speaking loudly to drown out his pounding heart, "Woman, I do not know Him."

It hadn't even been six hours since Jesus had stood in the upper room, predicting that all His disciples would fall away that night. At that time Peter strongly objected, "Though they all fall away because of You, I will never fall away." He had boldly promised to die at Jesus' side. Yet now he stood trembling in front of a lowly servant girl.

The temple guards began taking notice of him. When asked again, he swore he didn't know this Jesus of Nazareth. That drew even more guards, like a trap closing ever tighter around him.

Peter could see they were growing more suspicious by the minute. One commented on his Galilean dialect, "Certainly, you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you."

Peter rashly swore that God should punish him if he knew Jesus, "I do not know the man."

At that instant a rooster's crow echoed across the brightening sky. It also cut through his racing thoughts and brought Jesus' words flooding back, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

At that very moment a motion in the crowd caught his eye. A face in the mob turned to look at him. In an instant the image of that face burned itself into Peter's memory—a face he would never forget. It was bruised and swollen from the slaps and punches of the Jewish leaders, covered with blood, spit and sweat—the face of Jesus, who Peter betrayed.

But it was the searching eyes that haunted Peter. Eyes filled with hurt, grief, pain, and sorrow—yet mingled with intense love and concern. The words echoed in his mind, "... Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." The vision of Jesus' face began to melt away into the tears filling Peter's eyes. Crushed by regret, he went out of the courtyard, weeping bitterly.

Regrets

Do you feel like Peter did that night? Are you haunted by the memory of a devastated look on your loved one's face? Does your stomach knot up at the memory of a serious responsibility you shirked—or a single moment of inattention? Do you lose sleep because of relationships you shattered with hasty words or careless actions?

Regret is that haunting image seared deep into your memory. For Peter, it was Jesus' face. For Peter, it was the mocking crow of the rooster each morning.

The great king of Israel, David, knew regret like that. He wrote about it in Psalm 32, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer" (Psalm 32:3-4).

That's the way guilt eats at us. King David was thinking of the adulterous affair he had with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his faithful soldiers. He thought his deed would go undiscovered until she sent him word she was pregnant. Thinking quickly, David brought her husband Uriah back home on leave, thinking he'd sleep with his beautiful wife and then think the child was his. But Uriah was too honorable—he refused to take comfort when his soldiers back in the field could not.

So the king sent him back to war carrying the orders that would cause his death in battle (see 2 Samuel 11). On the outside David's deceitful cunning was succeeding. No one knew what he had done. But deep inside his soul, his guilty conscience tormented him with regret, killed his appetite, and stole the sleep from his eyes. Regrets can paralyze us. They can drive away our confidence, our joy, our hope, our responsibility. How could David lead his men in battle when he had betrayed one of them and had him killed on the battlefield? How can we tell our children not to try drugs when we smoked pot with our buddies? How can we warn against the dangers of living together before marriage when we did it ourselves?

David only found peace when God sent a messenger named Nathan to expose and confront his sin. After the king openly confessed what he had done, Nathan assured him of God's complete and free forgiveness: "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Samuel 12:13b). David would cling to that promise from his God, especially when guilt and regret came calling.

How could God's simple sentence, "The Lord has put away your sin," remove the guilt of adultery and murder? That forgiveness rested in God's Son, Jesus Christ, who would take all David's sin and guilt upon Himself when the court—the same court Peter was watching—condemned Jesus to death. He went to the cross to take David's place, and He went there to take our place too. There He paid the full price of God's wrath for every murder, act of adultery, and heinous crime you and I will ever commit. His sacrifice set David free from the fear of death and hell. That's the key to dealing with your regrets. In the cross of Jesus Christ, all your sins—and all the consequences that arise from those sins—are forgiven, no matter how grievous.

But many of our failures refuse to lie buried and forgotten, don't they? What do you do when your bad choices replay themselves in your mind's eye or echo back over the years? How can you find peace when your misdeeds give birth to consequences that linger for decades—even repeating themselves in coming generations?

Reality

Guilt and regret are not easily set aside, especially when we face the devastating, lingering consequences of our actions. This fallout tends to stir new guilt and regret in our hearts, and make us wonder if God could possibly forgive us for choices that caused such far-reaching harm.

The first consequence of David's adulterous affair was the illness and death of the child conceived through it. But sadly, that wasn't the only consequence. The example David set by his lustful affair had a devastating effect on his children.

Sometime later, his firstborn son Amnon fell in love with his beautiful half-sister Tamar, David's daughter by a different mother. Crazy with desire, he trapped her in his room. She offered herself to be his bride and pleaded with him to ask their father's permission, but he raped her instead. Afterward he found his lust had transformed into a deep disgust toward her, so he drove her out and locked the door behind her.

Tamar's brother Absalom was furious at Amnon for raping his sister, and also at his father David for not saying a word about it. But instead of striking in passion, Absalom decided to nurse his grudge two full years before avenging his sister. He killed Amnon in cold blood, and he then fled to another kingdom for safety. Years later David finally asked him to return, but then refused to see him. Absalom began turning the hearts of the Israelites against David. Then he usurped his throne and sought to kill him, forcing David to flee for his life.

David gathered the faithful forces who had gone into exile with him; he then sent them to war against Absalom and the army of Israel. In the ensuing battle David's forces defeated those of Absalom and David's son was killed in battle. Upon hearing the news of his son's death David's guilt and regret came gushing out in these heart-wrenching words, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 18:33b).

No doubt David was looking back on that moment so long ago when he had spied the beautiful woman from the roof of his palace: if only he had turned away, but now Uriah, the baby, Amnon, and Absalom were all dead, and his daughter Tamar was devastated.

When we face the catastrophic results of our actions, when our sins come home to roost, it can be nearly impossible to forgive ourselves. God may forgive us, even the people we sinned against may forgive us, but we often find it hard to forgive ourselves. Life's devastating consequences only make that more difficult: spending time in prison; losing our job or home; watching our marriage go down in flames; grieving over children who disown us; struggling with poor health choices; or scrambling over money issues.

Regret uses these circumstances and consequences like clubs to pound over our heads. Deep regrets and despair can make us doubt God's love and forgiveness, and push us into the deep pit of misery.

That was the worst part for Peter. Jesus warned him that he would deny Him. Yet Peter was so confident in his own strength that he refused to even consider that possibility or see the need to pray for God's strength. In the upper room, mere hours before Peter stood in that courtyard, Jesus predicted Peter would deny Him. But oddly enough, He didn't call him "Peter," he reverted back to his given name "Simon" (see Luke 22:31). Jesus had given him the name Peter ("rock") when Simon boldly confessed Jesus was "... the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16b). Jesus was now calling him Simon because Peter's rock-like faith and confidence would soon melt away under the glare of the guards, and a lowly servant girl.

But Jesus went on to point out something far more sinister that was hovering in the background—something Peter was unaware of. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat" (Luke 22:31). There it was. It wasn't simply temple guards and servant girls who were threatening Peter. It was Satan himself.

It's significant the devil didn't merely ask for Peter; he demanded to have him. Just as he demands that you and I pay the due penalty for our sins. The name "Satan" means "accuser," which is his chief mode of operation. He tempts us to sin so he may accuse us before God, demanding punishment for our sins. And he uses regret and guilt to accuse us in our own hearts to drive us to unbelief and despair.

Satan wasn't content to leave Peter's denials in the past where they belonged; he kept bringing them up, compounding those sins with regret, guilt, shame and self-accusation. Satan wanted to use Peter's regret to crush him into powder. Then Simon would be like fine flour: easily blown about by the winds of doubt and persecution, totally incapable of helping to lead Jesus' New Testament church.

After all, how could he possibly be a leader in Christ's church? He was the denier—the blowhard who argued that his love and devotion to Jesus were greater than any of the others. Sadly, his cocky, self-assuredness had been shattered by the accusation of a simple servant girl.

That's how Satan uses guilt and regret to get to us too. He wants to grind you down so that you will feel disqualified to be the successful, influential person you could otherwise be. He wants you to isolate yourself, to withdraw from friends and family and turn in on yourself. He wants you to slog around in the mire and muck of your sin, guilt, regret and self-condemnation.

Restoration

So how can we overcome the paralyzing power of regret? Restoration is usually not a quick-fix process. In Peter's case, Jesus had to lay the groundwork before Peter was ready to set aside his guilt and receive Jesus' forgiveness by forgiving himself. Then he would be ready to take up the role Christ had called him to take.

While Satan had sought to pulverize Peter—Jesus said, "But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32a). It was this spark of faith Satan was truly after. If he could convince Peter as he successfully convinced Judas—that God could never forgive him for the horrendous sin he had committed, if he could use regret to snuff out Peter's faith—then he could take down one more of Jesus' disciples.

Satan is trying to use regret to take you down too. If he can intimidate you to doubt Jesus' love and forgiveness, he knows you'll never be the person God created you to be—the person Jesus restored you to be through His suffering and death on the cross.

Regret and guilt can make you think your family and world would be better off without you. But that's just Satan's lie. Read Peter's inspiring, powerful message in Acts 2; his revelation about the place non-Jews had in the church (Acts 10); and his comforting letters to Christians facing persecution (1 and 2 Peter). Think how much poorer the church would have been if Satan had succeeded with Peter!

Sadly, Satan's lie worked with Jesus' disciple Judas. After he betrayed Jesus, he was so overcome with guilt, regret and remorse that he saw no other way out than taking his own life. But what would have happened if he would have stuck it out a couple of days until Jesus rose again? Surely, the Lord would have delighted to restore him as He restored Peter. The church would have been so much richer with the great story of forgiveness and restoration Judas could have passed on to us.

To overcome the crushing power of Peter's regret, Jesus chose two special events. The first happened the very day Jesus rose from the dead. At that time the Lord made a special one-on-one visit to Peter (see Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5). This meeting between Peter and Jesus was so personal, so private that the details were kept out of the Bible. They were to remain between Jesus and Peter alone.

But the risen Jesus made a second appearance later when the disciples had returned from Jerusalem to the region of Galilee in the north. After sharing breakfast with them, Jesus had an extraordinary conversation with Peter—one that Peter's close friend John recorded for us. "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?'" (John 21:15).

Again, Jesus addresses him as Simon and not Peter. It is as though He's taking Peter back to that moment in the upper room. There Peter was so confident of his own strength he even promised his love was greater than that of all the other disciples: "Even though they all fall away, I will not" (Mark 14:29b).

In the remarkable verses found in John 21:15-17, Jesus asks Peter if he still thinks his love for his Lord is greater than that of his fellow disciples. For the word "love" Jesus chooses the Greek word "agape." This is the highest form of love—a committed, selfless, devoted love that will not fail, regardless of circumstances. Jesus is in effect asking, "Do you still feel the same way Peter? Are you still confident you love Me more than these?"

Peter said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."

If Peter had used the same Greek word agape that Jesus used, it would show he learned nothing. Instead, he chose the Greek word "philos," which means brotherly love, the affectionate love of a friend. Peter has been humbled, he is no longer bold enough to claim he has the strength to never fall away again. But he assures Jesus that he genuinely loves Him as a dear friend.

Jesus replies, "Feed My lambs." To "feed My lambs" means to care for people in the church as their pastor. He begins restoring Peter, preparing him for his work of teaching the saving story to all people.

But Jesus knows regret is not easily overcome. He asked Peter second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Again, Jesus uses agape, the word for unconditional love.

Peter said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." Yet again, Peter repeats the humble word philos. He can't claim God's lofty agape love. A second time, Jesus repeats his restoring charge: "Tend My sheep." Before, Jesus referred to His followers as lambs: young sheep. Now He expands Peter's charge to all believers, no matter what age.

But regret is a stubborn taskmaster. Three times Peter had denied knowing Jesus. Now Jesus gives him a third chance to profess his love. He asked Peter one last time: "'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?' Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?'"

Reading this text in English, one might conclude Peter's grief came from Jesus asking him the same question three times. But this is not the case. The third time Jesus lowered the bar by using Peter's own word philos instead of the higher agape. In effect, He was asking Peter, "Do you even love Me as a friend?"

Jesus' question may well have rattled Peter's thinking—echoing his own tormented thoughts, "Do you even love Me as a friend?" The fisherman surely hadn't acted like much of a friend in that courtyard as he distanced himself from Jesus, calling on God to be his Witness and Judge, calling down curses on himself. And now he stood exposed and guilty. Standing in regret and shame, Peter showed the glimmer of faith that was still alive in his broken heart. He said to Jesus, "Lord, You know everything; You know that I love You."

Again, Peter uses the lowly word philos, the brotherly love of friends. But he appeals to Jesus' divine knowledge. The glorious Son of God knows what is in Peter's heart—even if Peter failed to show it in his words and actions that dark night in the courtyard.

Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep."

For the third and final time, Jesus restores Peter. He gives him the charge to teach his believers young and old alike. Then Jesus gives a bold prediction to reassure the shaken Peter:

"Truly, truly I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.' (This He said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this He said to him, 'Follow me'" (John 21:18-19).

Back in the upper room Peter made the bold claim he would die with Jesus rather than deny Him. Jesus had answered with a prayer, “I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail” (Luke 22:32a). It is Jesus’ prayer which will uphold Peter each time he faces being arrested and killed for his faith in the future. Peter will be given the chance to once again deny and renounce Jesus of Nazareth. But in the future Peter’s faith will not fail. He will boldly confess his Savior, and in the end, glorify God by dying on a cross for Jesus’ sake.

Jesus gave Peter just what he needed: the assurance He would provide all the strength Peter would need to be able to stand in his faith. He makes the same promise to you as He restores you from the sins you regret, he will empower you to serve Him as you care for your family, friends and neighbors.

Satan tries to use your grief, guilt and regret to grind you down. He wants you to feel unworthy of Jesus’ love and forgiveness. He wants to keep you from gathering with other believers to be assured of God’s acceptance and peace from all the sins that haunt your days and nights.

Peter’s close friend and fellow apostle John wrote, “Whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and He knows everything” (1 John 3:20).

Wallowing in regret is not God’s will for you; it is Satan’s will for you. It is the millstone by which he crushes you, wearing down your faith. Like Judas, he wants you to doubt God’s love and the power of Jesus’ sacrifice—the blood He shed on the cross to pay the price for that sin you so deeply regret.

Jesus had plans for Peter. After he was assured of Jesus’ forgiveness and peace, the Lord promised Peter, “And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32b). Peter could carry the forgiveness he received from Jesus; he could share it with fellow Christians when they sinned. When anyone came to him with a heart laid low by guilt and regret, Peter could speak of his own denials, and how Jesus had forgiven him.

This is one of the reasons Jesus established pastors in His church, so they could hear your regrets in private, and assure you of God’s forgiveness—the same way Nathan assured King David of God’s forgiveness, the same way Jesus assured Peter.

Sometimes the voice of guilt and regret is deafening, drowning out everything else. When self-condemnation fills your mind, remember God’s voice speaks out with clarity and finality: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

The Bible often speaks of sin as black. Why does it change the color to red here? Is it because these deep, dark shades of red remind us of blood? Even if you are guilty of shedding the blood of another—causing his or her death—Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross can wash that guilt away and make you pure and holy in God’s eyes. Just as it made Peter pure and holy, setting him free from guilt and regret to become a powerful leader in the early Christian church, so will Jesus’ saving work bring freedom to your life.

Appropriately, the book of 1 Peter says it best: “Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

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For more information on this topic, the **Men's NetWork** from Lutheran Hour Ministries has released a video Bible study entitled, *Regret, Reality, Restoration*. It includes interviews with people who battle regret over things they have done—and the loved ones they've hurt. It features a man who dragged his family down into his crack cocaine habit; a pastor's daughter who devastated her family by abandoning the faith; a trusted presidential advisor who was forced to leave the White House in disgrace; a man who as a teenager was behind the wheel in a fatal accident. To check it out, you can download it here www.lhm.org/men.

If you need a Christian counselor because you're struggling with unresolved guilt and regret, please contact a professional. This individual's biblical perspective can guide you to the promises of God in Scripture. These truths will lead you to understand how God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ can overcome your guilt and regret. To find a counselor near you, visit www.aacc.net/resources/find-a-counselor/

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