

Life, One Long Gift to Others
Ephesians 2:1-10
March 14, 2021

Do you have a regret in your life? Let me put it this way, “Is there any life that does not have any regret?” I believe the answer is “No.”

A few years ago, The *Harvard Newsletter* had a story of a man in Liverpool, England, who bought a lottery ticket every week and chose the same set of numbers. Then one day, he forgot to buy a ticket for whatever reason—and his numbers came up.

According to the story, the poor man was so full of distraught and regret that he committed suicide. Isn't that sad? Just the thought of what life he could have had, had he bought the ticket, was just too much to bear.¹

Regret is blaming oneself for the outcome of one's action or inaction. It is both a feeling and a pattern of thinking that you should have done differently.

Regret is a crippling emotion that chains us to the past. Regret brings shame and guilt. It erodes our self-esteem unless we learn from it and move on. Do you know what is the most common regret of old age? What I mean by “old age” is the age 95 and above.

Dr. Karl A. Pillemer, a professor of Human Development at Cornell University, asked 1200 elderly persons to find out what they regret the most in their lives. The most common and most often mentioned regret was that they “worried so much about everything.” They said the one thing they regret the most is that they spent a tremendous amount of time worrying about things, the things they could not change, the things that did not even happen, the things nobody cared about. If they were to live again, they said they would spend less time worrying and enjoy life more.² Worry is a misuse of energy and an enormous waste of precious and limited lifetime.

We may have different regrets. We may not have as many worries as some people do; but regret is common to all people. We all have regretted something in our lives. We just need to learn from it and move on.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mindful-self-express/201205/the-psychology-regret>

² https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-to-stop-worrying-reduce-stress_b_2989589

The apostle Paul knew the destructive power of regret. As a devoted Pharisee in his younger days, Paul had been a chief persecutor of the early Christians. He sought to destroy the movement of Jesus' followers. He arrested people and executed them. He participated in the execution of Stephen, who preached boldly about Jesus being the Messiah. We read about the story in the book of Acts, chapter 7. At that time Paul believed Stephen deserved to be punished and executed.

But after Paul had a life-changing encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he was completely changed. After his conversion, he had a life-long regret of his actions of persecuting Christians. He even called himself as "the chief" or "the foremost" among the sinners.³ But he didn't dwell in it. He recognized his mistakes and violent actions. But he did not dwell in his past.

Instead, he saw his past mistakes as "the place where he was changed from." It was his past. As bad and evil as it was, he knew he was delivered from that; he was changed from that. His memory of the past was the reason to celebrate the present. He had greater joy and thankfulness because he remembered who he was and what he was. When Paul learned from his past mistakes and changed his life, he became the most effective Christian evangelist in history.

Paul knew the destructive power of regrets, what it could do to him. But he also knew the indisputable power of Christ who changes a person totally from the inside out. He knew the power that can change a man from a murderer to a minister.

With this personal life changing experience, Paul writes boldly to Ephesians.

"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient"⁴

"You were dead," he says. He doesn't say, "You were messed up." Or "You made mistakes." Or "You were morally challenged." Or "You were failing to actualize yourself." No, Paul says, "You were DEAD." You were lifeless. You did not have life. You did not know how to have life or live life. "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived . . ."

³ 1 Timothy 1:15.

⁴ Ephesians 2:1-2.

Jesus did not come to help us reach our potential. He did not come just to make us better or nicer people. A Christian comedian, Mike Warnke, once said, “Jesus didn’t come to make bad people good. He came to give dead people life!” And that was not a joke.

Paul says in verse 3, “All of us once lived among the disobedient in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.”

All of us lived like that, lived in sin and disobedience. We were all sinners. We all made foolish decisions. Paul, however, reminds us of not only our past mistakes, but also what God has done for us. He writes, “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”⁵

We were dead, but now we are alive! Not like barely breathing kind of alive. But living an abundant and vibrant life kind of alive. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.”⁶

We didn’t deserve to be saved. We didn’t earn this new life. It was given to us, as a gift, a gift from loving and merciful God.

Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”⁷

We are given this new life in Christ “for good works,” which God intended it to be our way of life. God originally intended us to live a life doing good works. Now that we are given a new life in Christ, let us recognize that we are created for good works.

A couple of weeks ago we heard about a horrific car accident Tiger Woods had. I hope he recovers fully and quickly. Each time we have an incident like that

⁵ Ephesians 2:4-6.

⁶ John 10:10.

⁷ Ephesians 2:8-10.

or come close to death, it gives us an opportunity to think about the true meaning of life.

The best-selling author Stephen King had such an opportunity. In 1999, he was hit by a car while out walking near his home. The accident left him with severe injuries. His injuries included a collapsed right lung, multiple fractures in his right leg, scalp laceration and a broken hip.⁸

In an article in 2001 November issue of Family Circle magazine, King writes that having a close to death experience taught him to reflect on the real meaning of life.

This is what he wrote: “. . . I want you to consider making your life one long gift to others. And why not? All you have is on loan, anyway. All that lasts is what you pass on. . . . Giving isn't about the receiver or the gift but the giver. It's FOR the giver. One doesn't open one's wallet to improve the world, although it's nice when that happens; one does it to improve one's self. I give because it's the only concrete way I have of saying that I'm glad to be alive . . .”⁹

Listen to that quote again: “I give because it's the only concrete way I have of saying that I'm glad to be alive . . .” Are you glad to be alive? Are you grateful for the grace and the mercy that God has shown you? Do you remember what you were before Christ saved you?

Let us realize how blessed we are that we have life that Christ has given us. And with an overwhelming sense of gratitude let us be motivated to do good works. Pass on the love and mercy of God to others. As Stephen King wrote, “Consider making your life one long gift to others... It is the only concrete way I have of saying that I'm glad to be alive.” It is what Christ did for us. It is what we are called to do for others.

We were not made to live in the past, chained by our regrets. We were made for an abundant life of fellowship with God and service to others.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_King

⁹ "What You Pass On" by Stephen King, Family Circle, Nov. 1, 2001, p.156.