

*Isaiah 43:16 This is what the LORD says—
18 “Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.*

ANYTHING YOU’D LIKE TO FORGET?

Dear Friends in Christ,

Have you recently seen an interview of a famous public person? I’m not talking about anyone in particular, just in general. If someone has been in the public eye for a long time, for decades, a common question for the interviewer to ask is—it seems like it’s almost a required question —is this, “Do you have any regrets?” It is the predictably popular thing for the celebrity to answer, “I have no regrets” – or something close to it. I always want to ask, “Have you never said something that hurt somebody? Or maybe you have no regrets because you wanted to hurt them.” “I have no regrets— Have you always been as caring about other people as yourself? Or maybe you’re the only one who is important.” “I have no regrets—Are you saying that it would not have been possible for you to be a better person, ever?” I just don’t buy it. In my opinion, the only people who could claim “No Regrets” are perfect people (and there has precisely one of those in the history of the world), or self-centered people, or people with a lot to hide, or maybe they just understand something different in that question.

And maybe that’s it. Maybe people have a different definition of regret. Regret looks at the past and says that something I did was not right. Regret, as I would define it, (and maybe you would not agree) is feeling that I have failed morally and wish I could have done better. It’s a bit like repentance, but without saying “I’m sorry” to God.

“So Pastor, do you have any regrets?” Here’s my answer, “How much time do you have?” Or if you want me to write it down, “How much paper you got?”

That is not to say that regret is a wonderful thing. Regret can be a valuable source of learning. But here is the danger of regret: It can consume us.

- You could write your regrets down and burn the paper, but that doesn’t get rid of it. We still remember.
- You can shred the documents, delete the emails, burn the receipts, cut up the pictures, but none of that will get rid of regret.
- You can drink to forget, or move far away, or hide in a cave, but your memories will find you out.

I don’t have a cure-all for keeping regret in its proper place. And to tell the truth, this sort of thing can require professional help. But the essential starting point of dealing with regret positively is in today’s reading where God tells us, **“Do not dwell on the past.”**

Isaiah, as a prophet, spoke to the people of Israel. Now if ever there were a nation with a collective conscience haunting its present, it was Israel.

Their reasons for their regret were journalled in the Old Testament. Remember that one a couple weeks ago? Israel stood in open rebellion against Moses and many of them were swallowed alive when the earth opened up. And a couple hundred others were carrying their censers before God and he incinerated them? Do you remember another time when the entire nation went to worshipping the Golden Calf? The Old Testament is full of it. By the time of Isaiah, Israel had been the running around in this circle for 700 years, a cycle of sin and repentance and restoration.

Isaiah here, is at that restoration phase. They had sinned. They had repented. And in these words, God is pronouncing his reconciliation with Israel; he is announcing that they are now at peace.

But often our mind does not accept that. We think of past sin, and we feel guilt about what we did. Maybe that's because we have great difficulty forgiving, 100%, to the bottom of our hearts. And since we have such great difficulty forgiving—even people who have apologized to us—we also have difficulty believing that God can forgive us competely. And that leads to regret.

Sometimes the smallest things trigger regret. Just the smallest thing—like a crack in the plaster.

There was a boy about seven years old who got in trouble and was sent to his room. (And I'll just let you know, I'm not telling a story about the any of the pastor's kids.) Not being happy about his punishment, he threw a temper tantrum while lying on his bed. He kicked the wall—hard as he could. After a couple kicks, he cracked the plaster (this is in an old house). At some point his dad found out about it and if that boy thought he was in trouble before, now he learned what real trouble was.

Decades later, that boy could still remember the shape of that crack in the wall. It was kinda round in the middle where his heel had hit, and then from the bottom left side a crack followed along the lathe of the plaster for a couple inches. That crack was imprinted on his mind because it was one of the last things he saw every night and woke up to every morning for seven or eight years. Right there, just a couple inches above the covers of his bed, about half way down the bed. A testimony to bad behavior. A reminder staring him in the eyes for nearly a decade of his formative years, condemning him. A tiny thing, but powerful.

You might think it was pretty mean of his parents to leave that crack in the wall. It's almost like they were holding his seven-year-old rebellion against him. For a long time that boy thought that was why they left it there. But don't hold it against the parents. They didn't leave it there to be mean. How did that boy know? He knew because he asked them. When he was 14 or 15 and they painted the room and plastered over the crack, he asked his dad if he remembered about that crack in the wall. His dad had no idea—he had no idea. That crack in the wall had meaning to only one person. Sometimes regret is a private matter. It is always an internal matter.

“Do not dwell on the past.” I'll bet a couple of you have your own versions of the crack in the plaster, a reminder of sin. What are they for you? What places or things do you frequent or see that you feel are a continual reminder of your past sin? What in life makes you feel like *“my sin is always before me”*? (Psalm 51:3).

Now we should be clear. Sometimes remembering our past sins can be valuable. They can teach us to be careful, to beware. For that boy, the value of that crack in the plaster was to remind him to not lose his temper. In that way there is value to remembering, even regretting.

But that is not what we are talking about here. But there is something that boy needed to forget about that crack in the plaster. He needed to forget the guilt. To be honest, the seven-year-old couldn't remember if he apologized to Dad and Mom. But he did to God. And whenever we do that, that is where we need to drop the burden of guilt and leave it. Forget the guilt. Forget it because Jesus takes the shackles tying us to that guilt and he cuts the weight of the guilt from us, and he carries it for us.

That was God's message to Israel. **“Do not dwell on the past.”** It is not a denial of their sin. They had sinned. But it was forgiven.

The reason we can be so hopeful about past sins—sins a whole lot worse than a seven-year-old's temper tantrum—the reason I can be so hopeful about your and my past guilt is that God has told me to tell you this. I'm not saying that God spoke to me and gave me this sermon last night. But God's word speaks directly to you in Isaiah 40:1 when it says, *“Comfort, comfort my people... proclaim to [them] that [their] sin has been paid for.”* Or *“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us”* (Psalm 103:12). Or think of these beautiful words spoken by the prophet

Micah: *“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin... You will... hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea”* (Micah 7:19).

Do not dwell on the past. You are forgiven! And so are the people around you. Why do I add that? I have heard people, Christians, when confronted with their sin say, “But I know what some of the people in this church have done in the past.” And I just have to feel sad in my heart, because they don’t get it. It’s not about what people have done in the past. It’s not religion by comparison. It’s about what God says now. Not only are we not to dwell on our forgiven past, we are not to dwell on other people’s forgiven past either.

That can even affect how you listen to a sermon. When you hear a sermon about God’s plan for marriage, and you remember a past indiscretion, maybe a wrongful divorce, failures to being loving or respectful to your spouse—and *if you have repented of them*—you should feel no guilt about that. It is forgiven. No messenger of God should ever bring up past sins to haunt you. If you have repented of those sins, apologized and said sorry for them, they are fully and conclusively forgiven. God himself says that he has separated them from you like the east from the west. He has thrown that guilt into the depths of the ocean. It’s gone.

And if you are a young person who has not kept yourself as morally pure as you ought—but you have turned to your Savior in sorrow over sin, that guilt is gone. Forever. No pastor or anyone else has the right to make you ashamed of a forgiven past. You are God’s dear child.

If you find yourself in a prison cell, feeling tremendous regret, know that Jesus has paid for your sin, and that in repentance you will find forgiveness. And while prison walls may communicate mankind’s condemnation, in God’s eyes you are fully forgiven. That sentence is not to fulfill divine justice.

Oh, each of you can be sure that your conscience will try to trip you up. In your down times, your life will pass before your eyes and you may well feel the weight of past sins. **“Do not dwell on the past.”** And Satan, Satan will try to use your past to accuse you. (His name means, “Accuser”!) He will try to make you feel unloved by God and worthless to your fellow man. The LORD God himself tells you, **“Do not dwell on [your] past.”** Other people, especially when they feel threatened by you or jealous of you, people will find a special kind of evil joy in bringing up your past sins. **“Do not dwell on the past.”** Every Christian can think of the past as Paul did in our second reading: *“Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal... for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”* (13-14).

Paul had a special way of dealing with regrets of his past. It went like this: “You are right in saying that I am a terrible sinner. You can point out that I was responsible for the death of people—and I was. You can say that I blasphemed the name of Jesus—and I did. You can say that I was the most arrogant, self-righteous hypocrite in the world—and I was. And while I regret all of that, these things also speak of how great my Savior is! He took all that and he paid for it on a cross. And now to God, the sins of my past are past. Isn’t he a wonderful God?”

Do I have regrets? What sensible person does not? I know of many times I could have been better than I have been. But I also know that God has forgiven those sins. And as far as it lies in you, do not dwell on the past. Look forward to what God has called you to in Christ Jesus. Amen.