

redeeming REGRET

by Florence MacKenzie

The song, “Non, je ne regrette rien” or “No, I regret nothing” was initially popularised in the 1960s by French singer, Edith Piaf, and the slogan is still widely used on T-shirts, bracelets, tattoos, and advertising. I wonder, though, how many people can truly identify with this passionate proclamation of having no regrets. It seems to me that most of us, at some point, have felt a sense of loss or sadness for what might have been, blamed ourselves for a negative outcome, or wished we could turn the clock back and do things differently. If this describes you, then you’re no stranger to regret.

Is regret always negative?

Regret can range from mild disappointment to prolonged feelings of guilt. It can cause us to believe we’ve truly blown it as we continually blame ourselves for what happened. Regret often keeps us stuck in the past and makes it difficult to see a way forward. Some of us even allow regret to define us, falsely believing that because we failed in one area, we are a failure in every area of our lives. At other times, we experience regret because we erroneously take responsibility for what went wrong. Without doubt, regret can be a heavy burden.

While regret is commonly viewed as being negative, it can also have a positive side. For example, regret can become a learning experience if it motivates us to change and we avoid making a similar mistake again. In the case of regret over missed opportunities, it can encourage us to become more pro-active, perhaps making it less likely we’ll allow a good opportunity to pass us by in the future.

Regret can also drive us to God for forgiveness when a bad outcome is a result of wrong behaviour on our part. Take the apostle Peter, for example, when he vehemently denied he knew Jesus, his regret was so great he cried bitterly (Lk. 22:54-62). But after a fresh encounter with the risen Christ (Jn. 21:15-19), we no longer see evidence of regret in Peter’s life. When Peter received the Lord’s forgiveness, regret was redeemed and this faltering disciple became more useful in the cause of Christ than he had ever been.

Responding to regret

An important starting point in responding to feelings of regret is to identify whether or not we are to blame for what happened. If we are not to blame, we need to refuse to bear false guilt over something for which we are not responsible. If we have contributed in a sinful way to the outcome, the way forward is to admit it to God, seek His forgiveness, and then accept that

forgiveness. Many of us have a hard time accepting the forgiveness God offers but, until we do, regret will have the upper hand as we continue to beat ourselves up over something we cannot change. Corrie ten Boom was aware of this and, in her book *Tramp for the Lord* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2005), she pictures God’s forgiveness as Him casting our confessed sins into the deepest ocean and then erecting a sign that says, “No Fishing Allowed”. When we penitently confess, God completely forgives.



What if I can’t put things right?

A while ago I was going through a particularly difficult time when a friend challenged me with the question, “What would make things right for you?” My response was “To be able to turn the clock back”. Since this wasn’t an option, I had to learn to accept that some things just can’t be put right in the way I might wish. I had to quit thinking about what might have been had I, or other people, acted differently. If you’re experiencing regret over an outcome that you may have contributed to but cannot change, I encourage you to consider the following suggestions.

- When you experience regret because you really can’t put things right between you and another person, make sure that things are right between you and God.
- Embrace the forgiveness He offers you and rejoice in it.
- Develop an attitude of gratitude by regularly offering thanks to God.
- Get involved in helping others: for example, a person who is troubled by regret following an abortion might want to offer some of her time at a crisis pregnancy centre or someone who regrets having not put things right with a dying parent might “adopt” an elderly person in their church or neighbourhood.

We may not be able to say “No, I regret nothing”, but the good news is that regret can be redeemed, enabling us to enjoy a life beyond the regret that has held us back for too long.