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Will My Regrets Ever Leave Me Alone? (Part I)

Acts 22:19: (NASB) *And I said, Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in you.*

We all have regrets. We all have times, decisions or moments in our lives that if we could get a child's game "do-over" we would take it in a heartbeat and go back with clearer thinking, firmer courage, more patience, deeper conviction, a bridled tongue or solid self-control. But we cannot get a "do-over." We cannot change what we have already allowed to happen or what we have already said, done or thought. So, what do we do? How do we handle our regrets in a way that keeps them from playing again and again in our heads? This is a good question and just ahead we think we have a good answer!

We need regret! Regret is a vitally important part of our lives, and we should not seek to be rid of it. Having said that, let's clarify... **Regret, while necessary, should not be a destination; rather, it should be a tool of motivation.** How do we know this? The Apostle Paul shows us this. Paul, in his pre-Christian experience as Saul of Tarsus, did many things that caused him deep regret. We will review Saul's actions and thoughts that ended up causing regret, but then we will see how Paul learned to use this regret as a tool.

Let's start with Paul before Agrippa explaining a small part of his end result - after his original shameful actions and his conversion: **Acts 26:19:** (NASB) *So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision...He was given a heavenly vision when he was on his way to persecute Christians. Here he gives a hint of his reaction to being shown how much he had to regret - he obeyed and lived his life according to that new enlightenment.*

How do we deal with our regret? We will not get Jesus to appear to us on the road like he did to the Apostle Paul. Paul had regret but for him **the regret was a catalyst and not captivating; it was a tool and not a destination!** How did he get there? Over the course of this two-part series, we will suggest five principles to help REFOCUS the power of regret. Paul's explanation of his conversion to King Agrippa is our source to collect all five of the principles.

Regret is very powerful, so we want to focus it in a positive direction. As an example, water is very powerful and can cause flooding, but if it can be appropriately rechanneled, it can create energy.

REFOCUS REGRET PRINCIPLE #1: ACCEPT AND EMBRACE THE PAIN OF WHATEVER IT IS YOU REGRET

Acts 26:14: Here is the simple truth that he had to accept: As Saul, Paul was persecuting his own long-awaited Messiah!

Saul had a heart for God. He wanted only to serve Him because he loved God above all else: **Galatians 1:15-16:** Choosing to serve God came to light through several dark and sinful actions.

How bad could Saul of Tarsus have been? Just how much did he have to regret?

Paul freely speaks of the darkness of his own actions several times in Scripture. We will refer to three instances, each to a different group of people.

1. To Christians: **Galatians 1:13-14:** Paul freely admits **to those of the Christian faith** the darkness of his sin. He persecuted the church of God excessively with burning desire. With this information only, one might want to "go to bat" for Paul and say this does not sound *that* bad. But it was actually worse.

The original account of Paul's actions regarding the stoning of Stephen: **Acts 8:1,3:** Stephen received no trial (which was illegal under Jewish law), and although he was allowed to talk, Saul and his cohorts had no desire to really "hear" the accused. They applied the portion of the Law that required stoning take place only outside of the city, but their motivation was wrong. *Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.* Saul was guilty of the satanic practice of taking a thread of truth and surrounding it with lies. ("Hey, we followed the law...we let him speak and we killed him outside the city walls!")

He is on his way to Damascus: **Acts 9:1-2:** He *breathed threats* to chain, humiliate and imprison those who were following after Jesus - where did the Law allow such behavior? He



used the Law as a tool to feed his misguided passion. How often have we gotten mad at something and blinded ourselves to anything except what we want to see in our anger? Afterwards, do we say, "What have I done/said/felt/damaged by my actions?"

Paul acted on his words - he helped others to persecute and then pursued his own crusade against Christianity. He was being encouraged to do so by Scribes and Pharisees who wanted to eliminate this sect.

2. To the Jewish community: Paul defends himself against the uproar that had occurred, accusing him of disrespecting the Jewish faith.

These verses are right after he recounts his conversion and is recounting the conversation he had with Jesus in a vision: Acts 22:19-20: Paul freely admits to the Jewish people that on several occasions he had Christians beaten and imprisoned. Where did the Law give him such authority? It did not! His actions and thoughts were so dark and evil. The only reason we know about this is because Paul himself told us. He embraced the pain of his actions and accepted what he had done to the point where he could talk about it in detail.

The Apostle Paul is showing us that to tame regret we *cannot* deny it; we have to accept it and embrace its pain.

Could anyone ever trust such a vile character as Saul of Tarsus?

3. To the Gentiles: Paul is in trouble for preaching the Gospel.

(Source: McGee) Paul is now speaking to a man (King Agrippa) who understands what he is talking about. Agrippa is an intelligent man, he knows the Mosaic Law, and he understands the Jewish background. Paul really rejoices in this opportunity to speak to such an instructed man who will understand the true nature of the case.

Paul before King Agrippa: Acts 26:9-11: How would we view someone who did these things today? He pursued, hunted, tricked, shackled, imprisoned, pressured and consented to the killing of Jesus' own followers...would you trust him? As a Christian, you would want to stay as far away from him as possible.

Put yourself in the shoes of Ananias, who was asked to trust Saul: Acts 9:10-19: (NASB) Can you imagine how uncomfortable it would have been to face the man who was trying to hunt down and kill you and your Christian friends and family? Ananias had great faith that Jesus knew better.

Saul was misdirected and violently wrong in his unbridled and raged-filled attempts to hurt and destroy the name of Jesus, but deep down he was a good man. He used his zeal in the wrong way.

Paul had no choice but to embrace the pain of his own actions; he needed to in order to cope with them because they were so bad. He did this by having the courage to repeat them to several different audiences: Jews, Romans and Christians. He hid his actions from no one. What he did was to apply the second principle (coming soon!) to make the first principle work.

King David had regret - he, too, had to accept it and embrace its pain: Psalm 51:1-2: Psalm 51 was written because of David's sin with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband. David embraced the pain of his regret by writing it and admitting it before all - adultery, murder, pre-meditation...

How do we embrace the pain of our own regrets? One way is to be willing to be vulnerable to others whom you trust - tell them without excuses or rationalization of what you did. Own the pain.

Sometimes we did the best we could and regret our decisions anyway, but more often we were doing something we knew was marginal or in a gray area and did it anyway out of anger, frustration, pride, ego, want or whatever. Now we are stuck with it and it replays over and over in our head.

REFOCUS REGRET PRINCIPLE #2: ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR WRONG THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS

Accepting and embracing the pain is the foundation necessary for healthy regret. We want to turn our regret from something hurtful to something healthy. To assume responsibility might



sound like the same thing, but it actually is a further step - consider again the Apostle Paul. What was the responsibility he had to own up to?

Paul before King Agrippa - picking up where we left off: Acts 26:14: *Kicking against the goads* - Paul states this in his personal testimony - it is not in the original telling of the account. This means we only know about the details of this conversation between Jesus and Saul because Paul tells us. By doing so he assumes personal responsibility for his actions.

What does this phrase mean? Basically, "You and your conscience know better."

(Source: NetNotes) "Goads" are pointed sticks used to direct a draft animal (an idiom for stubborn resistance).

(Source: Greek Testament Critical Exegetical Commentary by Henry Alford) This is found here only; in Acts 9 the words are spurious. The metaphor is derived from oxen at plough or drawing a burden, who, on being pricked with the goad, kick against it, and so cause it to pierce deeper.

Jesus was telling Saul, "You are in the service of God Himself. You being a Pharisee, I have seen your love for God's Law and God's way. Saul, you truly are His servant, yet you know in your heart that you have violated your conscience. Even worse, you are a living violation of all the Law stands for! Why do you go against God and His Law? Why do you seek to discredit and destroy His people - my people? *It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*" With this statement, Jesus revealed to Saul what Saul already knew in his heart but chose to ignore. He was godless in his actions and used the name of God to cover his godlessness. (Yikes!) Saul had to accept responsibility that this was his fault.

By Paul himself revealing these otherwise unknown details in his own testimony, he is claiming personal liability for the wrongs he committed and now regretted. "Jesus told me I was responsible," is what Paul is teaching us. Saul fought against righteousness and his conscience. While his misdirected passion was encouraged by his superiors, Paul freely admitted he allowed his own baser nature to rule - there was no excuse!

To assume responsibility for our regretful thoughts and actions requires us to focus on what we pay attention to and what we ignore: 1 Timothy 4:1: Someone once said, "You become what you focus on." Inevitably, our focus is determined by the input we allow into our minds. This means that we can carelessly allow darkness to become an influencer (which in itself is a regretful action), which would lead us to potentially regretful actions.

King David also took dramatic steps to assume responsibility for his sins. He wrote down his sins and had the Psalms read to the people, elevating those sins to the deserved height of their evil rather than buffering or downplaying their effects in any way.

Psalms 51:3-4: David laid his life squarely on God's judgment, labeling his sin as done against God. He did not ask for mercy; he simply assumes all responsibility upon his own shoulders.

To accept and embrace the pain of our regretful actions (**Refocus Regret Principle #1**) is the foundation for healthy regret. To stop the process here would be a disaster for all we have thus far is pain that has no hope of subsiding. Fully and unequivocally assuming responsibility (**Refocus Regret Principle #2**) creates even more reason for regret to swallow us, yet we cannot refocus our regret unless we do this.

So, how do we positively assume the responsibility of our own regretful actions? NOT like this:

Assume responsibility honestly and with courage, knowing that God's grace and strength will not leave us here to wilt under the intense heat of honesty and truth. **DO NOT STOP HERE!**

As we said before, although occasionally what we regret is as a result of us falling short while doing the best we could at the time, many times our regretful actions were bad choices that came out of fear, laziness, ego, carelessness, etc.

Such is the following example of a regretful action: Galatians 2:11-14: (NASB) ¹¹*But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.* ¹²*For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.* ¹³*The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy; with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.*



Paul sees Peter as guilty of being hypocritical and not as one who was doing his best. Peter knew better! ¹⁴*But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?*

Paul calls out Peter's hypocrisy in public. The lesson? When we know better, we are expected to do better. When we lead, it should be with spiritual integrity. Do not let others' opinions bring you to regretful actions!

REFOCUS REGRET PRINCIPLE #3:

APPLY FAITH AND THEN APPLY TRUST THAT WE ARE FORGIVEN, AND THEREFORE IN A POSITION FOR SPIRITUAL GROWING AND NOT EMOTIONAL GROANING

Here is where many of us lose the battle of regret and end up wallowing in the mire of self-pity and guilt. We do not apply faith, trust and forgiveness.

How did Paul avoid the deadly choice of wallowing? Acts 26:15-17: The amazing thing about regret and this account of Paul's past is that Jesus taught him step-by-step how to manage regret. Jesus did this because Paul was to be an integral link in the gospel plan and needed to be able to thoroughly focus on the challenges he would daily face. Paul would not have the time nor available energy to go back to the past and wallow in it. He had too much else to do. Jesus taught Paul how to take his regrets and use them as tools to move forward.

Here is an overview of the necessary steps of FAITH, TRUST and FORGIVENESS in the face of regret. We will review these in detail, as well as Refocus Regret Principles #4 and #5 in Part II of this program.

FAITH and TRUST can only feed FORGIVENESS when:

- A. You know who is dealing with you:** *And I said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.* Saul's experiences of perpetrating evil came to this - he had been persecuting his own Messiah, his own Savior and he now knew it. Our sinful actions and the resulting regret are in their appropriate place when they are placed before Jesus OUR Savior.
- B. Faith is put into action:** *But get up and stand on your feet* - Faith is not just a thrill for the heart or an exercise for the intellect; it is a transformative conviction: "Get Up! Stand on Your Feet!" Once we have accepted and embraced the pain from the cause for our regret, and once we have assumed full responsibility for it, faith requires us to stand up!
- C. Faith is based in humility so that it can be redirected:** *For this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you.* - Forgiveness and grace overflow with this proclamation from Jesus to Saul, the perpetrator of evil. Jesus knew his heart and saw his potential because of his heart. **JESUS SAW PAST THE DARKNESS AND THE EVIL OF SAUL'S ACTIONS.**
- D. We trust based upon our faith:** Faith is the foundation. Faith accepts forgiveness, trust is the building. Trust applies forgiveness to our deepest and most mortifying sins and circumstances. Trust is not a topical ointment! Trust is faith deeply applied in a mature fashion. Jesus showed Paul his need to build a secure trust upon his faith: *rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you.*

There is so much more to managing our regrets! Part II is just two weeks away! We can manage our regrets in a godly way - Jesus taught us how.

*So, will my regrets ever leave me alone?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*