



Be Not Afraid When Regrets Loom Large

Advent Series #2

2 Samuel 24

David Sunday

December 4, 2016

It's one of the most frequently repeated commands in the Bible: "Be not afraid." That is the focus of our Advent sermons this month. Today we're focusing on "Be not afraid when regrets loom large."

I read an article in which the author called regret, "The barbed-wire hula hoop revolving around your mind." I thought, "What an apt description!" I didn't want to forget that. "The barbed-wire hula hoop revolving around your mind." You can feel the pain of regret with that analogy.

Often when we're tormented by regrets, human counsel encourages us to just let it go. What's done is done. That ship has sailed. Why regret what you cannot change? But that's like telling you to ignore an itch you cannot scratch. The very fact you cannot reach it makes it all the more miserable.

Lately, I've been praying a new prayer that was in the Prayer of Confession earlier in this service: "Please rid me of bad temper, self-pity and constant regrets." God wants to do that for you today. He wants to rid you of constant regrets. That is a gift God wants you to receive this Christmas season.

No matter how many or how great or how vile the sins are that you have done, or how egregious the duties you have left undone, no matter that you cannot rewrite the script or rewind the tape or retract your words or get a "do-over" on those things you so greatly regret—in spite of all that, God wants you to know you can be relieved and you can be released from your regrets. He has made a way for regret to be forgotten and He wants you to receive the gift of forgotten regrets today.

A Godly Man's Regret

We're going to look at a godly man's regret in 2 Samuel 24. This story comes from the life of King David. At this point in 2 Samuel we're kind of at the grand finale of David's life.

Remember, he was a “man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22). He has fought and won victories. He has written the lion’s share of the Psalms in the Bible. He was someone who knew God deeply and loved Him immensely. And he has ruled God’s people with skill and success.

But he’s also a man who has known his fair share of regrets. He was someone who has committed adultery. He has been treacherous, resulting in the death of one of his most loyal soldiers. He was someone who experienced the unraveling of his family—partly as a consequence of his own sins. And he has known what it’s like to try to cover up his sin, making matters worse.

Here he is at the end of his life, and this righteous, godly man makes another tragic and sinful decision: he orders a census to be taken of all the fighting men of Israel and Judah. The Bible doesn’t exactly tell us why this was wrong, but his own commander Joab immediately knew David was making a foolish decision. Look at 2 Samuel 24:3: *“But Joab said to the king, ‘May the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it, but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?’”*

Joab is saying, “David, God has power to increase your army, to be your security, to protect you. He’ll give you everything you need before your very eyes. But why would you do this thing—numbering the people?” It looks as if David is not trusting the Lord to be his security and protector. Or possibly pride is rising up in David’s heart as he numbers how many fighting men are loyal to him. But as soon as the report comes at the end of this nine-month count of how many valiant men there were in Israel and Judah, we read in verse ten that David’s own heart struck him.

You know what that’s like. It’s a vivid image: his heart struck him. To be stricken by your own heart is to realize, “I’ve failed miserably. What I’ve just done is foolish!” You know what it’s like to feel sick to your stomach. I’ve experienced it like a fever in my mind. It brings a blush to my face. It’s almost a feeling of panic, as I realize, “I have sinned. What I’ve done is foolish. I should have known better.” But I can’t take it back. I can’t fix what I’ve done. I can’t change what I’ve said. My conscience is stricken.

It’s even worse when your sin affects other people. Let’s fast-forward in this story to verse 17 where David recognizes that his sin affects others. When your family is affected by your sin, when people at work suffer because of something you’ve done, when a church suffers the consequences of the sins of a leader—it’s painful. David recognizes this in verse 17:

Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who was striking the people, and said, “Behold, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father’s house.”

David is a shepherd. The flock under his care is now suffering for his sin. He should have taken responsibility for them, but instead they're suffering for him. And this barbed-wire hula hoop is whirling around David's conscience. And he should feel regret, just as you and I should feel regret when we have sinned and when we have done foolishly. The question is not whether or not we should experience regret. The question is: should we be paralyzed by those regrets? How long should we hold on to our regrets? Does God want regret to be a necessary, temporary symptom that drives us to a cure? Or does God want regret to be a terminal condition that robs us of our joy and peace and comfort in life and in death? Does God want us to be haunted by our regrets, or does God want us to find healing from our regrets?

I can tell you how Satan answers that question. Satan wants you to be filled with self-loathing because of what you have done or failed to do. Yet sadly, sometimes Christians think that's what God wants as well. They think we will be holier and more serious Christians if we live with a healthy dose of self-hatred. But that's warped logic. We should hate our sin, but we should never hate someone created in the image of God. And you are created in God's image.

Self-hatred robs you of joy in salvation from Christ, and it makes you unaware of God's grace and mercy to you. This causes you to have little love for others, because when you're filled with the shame of self-loathing, you withdraw. You isolate. And instead of focusing on Christ and magnifying His wonderful grace and goodness, you get all wrapped up in yourself, thinking about self all the time. It's really a form of false humility, because the focal point of self-loathing is self. It's an anti-gospel way of dealing with our regrets.

A Way of Escape

But God provides a way of escape from the temptation to ruminate on your regrets. There is a better way, and King David knows the way and shows us the way in this passage. So let's look at the way of escape from crippling, paralyzing regret.

Step one is to bring your regrets directly to the Lord. Come to Him with what you regret. David doesn't hide his sin from the Lord. He doesn't do what Adam and Eve did in the Garden, trying to cover himself with the fig leaves of his own righteousness. He owns it. We see it in verse ten, this frank, brutal admission of his great sin, iniquity and foolishness. Look at these words, after David's heart is stricken: *"David said to the Lord, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, please take away the iniquity of your servant, for I have done very foolishly.'"*

No holding back here. No whitewashing. No minimizing. He sees the gravity of his sin. He's very frank in the acknowledgement of it. And this is where it starts. This is step one in the way of escape. Be careful to call sin, sin. Own it.

Let me say this as a word of caution: be careful also not to call things that are not sin, sin. A lot of our regrets are vague. They're not specifically defined as sin in Scripture. We just have this kind of feeling that we're not good enough and don't measure up. If you tend to think, "Maybe God wants me to feel this healthy dose of self-loathing all the time," you need to develop biblical discernment about what is truly sin and what is not. Satan is an accuser. He loves to induce this vague sense of guilt. It's just kind of there. There's never any specificity to it. It doesn't lead you to Christ and to repentance. It just weighs you down. That's Satan's work as accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10).

So there are lots of ways we can feel guilty. I read a little article by Kevin DeYoung where he wrote:

How do we feel guilty? Let me count the ways. We could pray more. We aren't bold enough in evangelism. We like sports too much. We watch movies and television too often. Our quiet times are too short or too sporadic. We don't give enough. We bought a new couch. We don't read to our kids enough. Our kids eat Cheetos and French fries. We don't recycle enough. We need to lose 20 pounds. We could use our time better. We could live someplace harder or in something smaller.

On and on and on and on it goes. Regrets, regrets, regrets. A lot of times we feel guilty just because we aren't doing enough. But sometimes it's because we're not as mature as other Christians are, or perhaps not as disciplined, not as far along. So what happens if we're at the beginning of the discipleship journey, and someone else is way ahead of us? Should we feel regret? Should we have self-loathing? Or should we look and say, "Thank You, Lord, for what You're doing in their lives. I want to follow their example. I want to grow. It challenges and inspires me. I want to become more like them." That's the right response. Not to heap regrets upon ourselves. We need to know the difference between sin and immaturity or needing to grow more, needing to continue to pursue sanctification.

One of the ways we can define what is truly sin is by looking at the Bible. In fact, that's the only way, right? Go to the Ten Commandments. See God's moral law revealed there. Turn to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus drives those commandments down to the heart level and shows us how God wants us to be transformed from within.

When you see your sin biblically defined, that's when you need to go directly to the Lord with your sin and not wallow in guilt. God wants you to see the greatness of your Savior and rest in the work He has accomplished on the cross. The way you do that is by repentance, which is changing the way you think about your sin and aligning your thoughts about your sin with God's thoughts about your sin. Then acknowledge that what God says about your sin is true and turn away from your sin to Jesus and to the work He has done on the cross for you. Then rest in Him.

Step one is to bring your regrets directly to the Lord. Step two is to fall on God's mercy. Fall on Jesus. Fall on His mercy. That's what David does. The morning after his prayer in verse ten, the Lord sends him a prophet—Gad—who is one of David's seers. We read in verse 11: *"When David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, 'Go and say to David, 'Thus says the Lord...'"* Here we see the gravity of David's sin and the consequences that are being presented to him.

"Three things I offer you. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you." So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, "Shall three years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me."

Now, here's the key—verse 14: *"Then David said to Gad, 'I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.'"* That's the key. Fall on God's mercy.

David understands and accepts that there must be a judgment on his sin. But he says, "I would rather have God judge me directly than to have it come through human beings, because I know that God mingles mercy with His judgment. I know that God never overdoes it. I know that God's mercy is great—greater than anything I've ever seen in a human being." Do you have that sense of God? Is that how you view Him? "His mercy is great. Let me fall into His hands."

You might remember a few years back there was a toddler at Brookfield Zoo who fell 18 feet into the gorilla cage. He survived, but he was in critical condition. Do you remember how he got out of Gorilla Land at Brookfield Zoo? There was a seven-year-old female gorilla named Binti who found that little toddler, who picked him up and cradled him in her arms, and brought him safely to the gate, where the zoo keeper could get the toddler out of there alive.

As we think about that, we think, "Wow. That's wonderful." Binti—we don't expect that kind of mercy and compassion from a gorilla, do we? We think, "Wow, there are actually nice gorillas out there." But I don't know any parent who's running back to Brookfield Zoo and

saying, “Hey, let’s see if Binti will do it again,” tossing their toddler into the gorilla cage. Because we suspect that Binti’s mercy and compassion on that one day was a fluke. That was probably the exception, not the rule. We’re not going to put that to the test again and again and again. We don’t think gorillas are always going to be merciful to human beings, do we?

I wonder if that’s how you think about God? Dale Davis says:

I wonder if our gut-level thinking is to have a gorilla view of God’s mercies? We tend to look upon mercy as a divine exception, rather than as the divine character. But it wasn’t that way with David. Even in His wrath, David knew he was not facing a gorilla God. God’s mercy had gripped him. He understood that God’s wrath is wrapped in mercy.

Wrath wrapped in mercy. Do you know that about your God? Do you trust Him? That’s the key to being relieved of your regrets. Bring them directly to God and fall on His mercy.

So the judgment comes in verse 15. *“So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time. And there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba 70,000 men.”* That’s significant. That’s judgment. But then God’s mercy intervenes. Verse 16:

When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, “It is enough; now stay your hand.” And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

That’s significant, because in verse 18 Gad, the prophet, is going to tell David to build an altar there at that threshing floor. And in verse 19 David does just as the Lord commands, building an altar at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. He is going to offer a sacrifice of oxen to die in the place of himself and the people. These sacrificial animals are going to bear the judgment that David and his sin and the sins of God’s people deserve.

That place is significant, because later on in the Bible, in 2 Chronicles 3:1, we are told where the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite was located. It was at Mt. Moriah, the very place where Abraham was told to march his son Isaac up the mountain to be sacrificed—and God intervened by providing by providing a ram in his place. Then later in 2 Chronicles we learn that this is where Solomon built the temple, where sacrifices would be perpetually offered for the sins of the people. Until finally, one day, outside that temple, would come One Who was qualified to make the final sacrifice for the sins of God’s people, that Child Who will be pierced through by nails and spears, Whose cross will be born for me and you. And on that cross, as Jesus dies, He’s

going to say, “It is finished! I have dealt with the sins and the guilt of My people. I have taken away their shame. It is paid in full.”

Friends, I urge you, because of this wonderful thing that God has done for us in Jesus, to fall on God’s mercy. Own your sin. Acknowledge it before the Lord, and fall on His mercy. Because here is a Shepherd Who is qualified to stand in His people’s place and take the guilt of their sins.

The Good Shepherd

David recognized, “I haven’t been a very good shepherd in this instance.” He says in verse 17, *“I have sinned, and I have done wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father’s house.”* I want to stand in the place of Your people. That’s what David is saying there. But David was a sinful sheep—just like all the rest. But “behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Micah foretold of Him in Micah 5:2: *“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”* And what did Micah say? *“He shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure.”* They will be free from the torment of regret. *“They shall dwell secure...and he shall be their peace.”* Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. A clean conscience. Sins forgiven. Regrets relieved.

This is what God offers to you this Christmas season. How do you get it? The word is: repentance. Listen to what God says to us in 2 Corinthians 7:10: *“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”*

So there’s a kind of regret that never gets relieved, because it refuses to fall into the hands of God. There’s a regret that never stops tormenting the mind and conscience, because it refuses to embrace the good news of the gospel. There’s a kind of regret that never goes away, because it feeds on unbelief—the unbelief that says, “I don’t believe what King David said about God. His mercy is not great. He’s more like the gorilla. I can’t trust Him.” That kind of regret never gets relieved.

But when we see Jesus, the Savior, bearing our sins on the cross, a Shepherd taking away our guilt, saying, “It is finished,” here is peace with God. And we say, “Oh, yes. I have sinned greatly. I have done a very foolish thing. I have committed iniquity before You, my God. But Your mercy is great and I fall on You.” There is peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7). There is a clean conscience. Your sins are removed from you as far as the east is from the

west (Psalm 103:12), and they are cast into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19). I call you, my friend, to fall on Jesus today. Acknowledge your guilt before Him. Say, “I trust You, Lord.”

Live Forgetfully of Your Regrets

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ who are laden with regrets, I want to call you to Jesus at the Communion Table and to give those regrets to Him. I want to close with a great summary paragraph by Barry Cooper. I want you think about this as we come to the Table this morning.

The difference, then, between godly regret and worldly regret is partly one of duration. If your regret keeps you on your knees longer than the time it takes to repent, there is something amiss. Good regret pays a fleeting visit; bad regret, like the thoughtless party guest at 3 a.m., outstays its welcome. Good regret is a doorway; bad regret is a destination. Good regret makes us more preoccupied with Jesus; bad regret makes us more preoccupied with self. Good regret drives us to repentance; bad regret drives us to distraction.

(Barry Cooper, Forget Regret)

Have you been hanging on to regrets for a couple months? Years? What are you saying about Jesus and what He’s done for you? He doesn’t want you holding on to that any longer.

Let’s pray.

O Lord, please rid us of bad temper, self-pity and constant regret. Your mercy is great, Lord, as we cast ourselves on You. If we’ve done some damage to relationships this year, help us take time this Christmas season to look for the people to whom we need to say, “I’m sorry.” Give us the confidence in Your mercy toward us that will enable us to not be afraid to mend fences and reconcile relationships. Help us say we’re sorry when we’ve hurt someone else. God, help us live lightly, joyously, freed from the anxious torment of constant regrets. Jesus sets us free. Thank You, Jesus, that You say, “It is finished.” We trust You, and we receive Your peace with God as a result of what You’ve done for us on the cross. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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