

**Reeks:** Letters to live by

**Titel:** ... Regret

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Good morning, friends, it's good to be with you. Those who are smiling are Lions supporters. Lovely to be with you as we continue our series through Philippians. We are going through chapter by chapter. Obviously we're not doing it verse by verse, but really just trying to give you a feel for this letter, and you can get, as you leave today, a resource that will help you read Philippians each day for this month, so please pick that up as you go. It's a, kind of, verse by verse resource through the letter that Paul writes to the Philippians, and we're in chapter three today, and I'm going to read to you from the middle part of the chapter. It's going to come up on the screen for you right now, Philippians 3:12-14.

Paul writes these words: not that I've already obtained all this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, one thing, sometimes it's a wonderful Bible study to look at all the times you come across that word, one thing, one thing, one thing, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal, to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

We think God so much for those words, amen. As I was preparing for this morning I came across a little bit of research that, I must confess, surprised me greatly. And in this particular research there was a claim that the most commonly expressed human emotion, besides the emotion of love or affection or care, is the emotion of regret, of regret. That surprised me. Frankie Sinatra was right after all – regrets, I have a few. I have a few.

My assumption is that, as we gather together in this auditorium this morning, whether we are 12 years of age, whether we are 80 years of age, anything in between, all of us here today know something about regret. The two words that are often associated with our regrets, and I'm sure you've used them sometimes, are those two words, those two painful words, "if only".

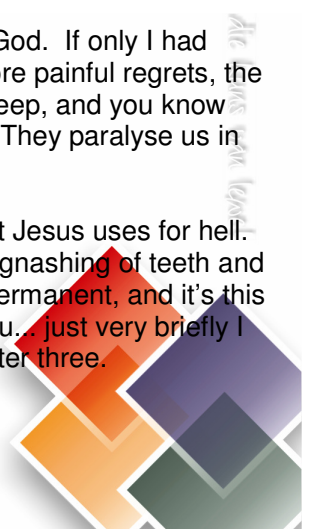
Just think back for a moment on this week gone by, some of those superficial regrets: if only I hadn't taken the William Nichol turnoff in rush-hour traffic. If only I hadn't eaten so much last night. If only I didn't have another beer. If only I had studied for that exam that I wrote. And those are just the superficial regrets.

Those are the regrets that come and go. But what about the painful regrets, the deep regrets, those regrets that walk around in our memory box, that haunt us, that won't let us go; if only I had shown my care to my parents while they were here; if only I had loved my partner more deeply and more wisely; if only I hadn't moved that money from the company's account into my account; if only I hadn't had an affair with my boss.

If only I had invested more time, more energy, more effort in my relationship with God. If only I had married my first boyfriend, my first girlfriend. These are the deeper regrets, the more painful regrets, the regrets that haunt us, that don't let us go, and often their effects on our lives are deep, and you know that, and I know that. Regrets imprison us in the past. They rob us of our future. They paralyse us in the present.

One of the most haunting phrases in the New Testament for me is the phrase that Jesus uses for hell. Jesus sometimes speaks of hell as a place of the gnashing of teeth and weeping, gnashing of teeth and weeping. That, for me, is a picture of regret. Regret is hell. Hell is regret made permanent, and it's this backdrop, friends, this backdrop of our deep, painful regrets, that I want to take you... just very briefly I want to take you into Paul's experience as he shares it with us in Philippians chapter three.

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I think of all the people in the New Testament, maybe of all the people in the Bible I think Paul knew most about regret. If you read the third chapter, verses six, seven, eight and nine, Paul speaks of the first three decades of his life. He was someone who really prided himself on having everything right in his life, circumcised on the eighth day, good Jewish boy, belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. He was one of the best Pharisees amongst the best Pharisees. He had these achievements. He had everything in place.

And it was this external righteousness, this emphasis that he had on always being correct, always being right, that led him into the deepest regret of his life. He persecuted the body of Christ. He persecuted the body of Christ in his correctness, in his rightness. He actively opposed the purposes of God, and yet , when you read this third chapter it becomes clear that he transcends his regret. He lives beyond it.

Look at these words again that I read to you a little bit earlier. Just look. Brothers, sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing, but this one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. Just leave that up there for a moment. Notice, Paul is not imprisoned in his past.

He is not imprisoned in his past. He remembers what he needs to remember, but he has put behind him what he needs to put behind him. He has not been robbed of his future. Look at that. I press towards the goal. There is this sense of future. He is not paralysed in the present. He is energetically participating in his life right now. There are no "if only's". And so the question that I asked myself on Friday and Saturday as I prepared: how come Paul could live beyond regret? And so I thought about his life, and I thought about some of the letters that he wrote to other people, and I tried to get hold of some of those things that helped Paul to move beyond regret, and I just want to share a few thoughts with you now, if I may.

Some of you may want to make a note of these things, because some of us are wrestling very deeply with regret at the moment. And the first thing that became absolutely clear to me, is that Paul was able to move beyond regret because he owned his regrets. He acknowledged them. He didn't rationalise them. He didn't excuse them. He didn't push them under the carpet. He didn't pretend that he didn't have any. He named them, he acknowledged them and he owned them.

He writes to Timothy, for example, these words. Just look at these words. Look at the self-honesty here. He says to Timothy, even though I was once a blasphemer, he owns it, and a persecutor, and a violent and an aggressive man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. But notice the first part of that verse. Paul faced his regrets honestly.

I think there are there are two broad categories of regret in our lives. On the one hand, there are those regrets of those things that we did that really were hurtful and painful and destructive, those things where we say "how could I have done that?" And then, on the other hand, there are those regrets of those things that we needed to do that we didn't do.

I got an email from Johan, who plays the piano, from Exclusive Books. He was reading a book in Exclusive Books. I thought you buy them from Exclusive, but he reads his books at Exclusive Books. And he knew that I was preaching, and so he came across this book and he sent me an email, the top five regrets of the dying.

And as he sent them to me I realised that all of the regrets were things that people wished they had done, but didn't do. I regret that I wasn't true to myself. That was the top one. I regret that I wasn't more in touch with my feelings. I regret that I didn't rest more. I found that a surprising one. I regret that



I wasn't more in touch with my friends. And I think the last one was I regret that I didn't let myself be more happier.

What are your regrets, friends? Can you own them today? Just acknowledge them. Don't push them under the carpet. Acknowledge them. Regret can be God's way of changing your life. Regret can be God's way of getting you to make a new decision before you die. Regret can be God's way of opening up a new future right now for you. It happened for Paul. It can happen for us.

But I think Paul did something else. Paul experienced something else. Paul was able to live beyond regret because he experienced the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ. He had looked into the face of God in Jesus Christ. Do you remember that encounter with Jesus Christ? He had seen the face of God in Jesus Christ and seen that it was a face of forgiving love, and he had experienced that forgiveness.

And it's that forgiveness that lies at the heart of our gospel. When we look into the face of God in Jesus Christ, we see the eyes of forgiving love; a forgiving love that will never ever let us go, never, never, a forgiving love that reaches out to us, no matter what we have done, no matter what we've done, a forgiving love that gives us a new righteousness not based on what we have done, but based on the grace and the mercy and the peace of God in Jesus Christ, a forgiving love that covers every regret, a forgiving love that opens up a new future, a forgiving love that empowers us to make restitution if we need to make restitution. Have you experienced this forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? It helps us to live beyond regret.

There's an English novelist, his name is Graham Greene, and in one of his novels one of his characters says these words: "I wish to God there's a place I could say sorry." And I want to say today, friends, there is a place we can say sorry. There's a place we can say sorry, and that place is the cross. And when we come to the cross it is the safest place to come with our regrets, and when I come to the cross and I look into the eyes of the crucified One they are the eyes of forgiving love. Have you experienced that forgiveness? Have you received it? Paul did. Paul did, and that's why he could live beyond regret.

But there was one more thing I sense in Paul's life. He puts his regrets under blessing. Let me explain what I mean. He wrote these intriguing words to the Galatians. I wish I had time to really unpack them. They're very intriguing, but just look at them. He says Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the gentiles through Jesus Christ so that by faith we may receive the promise of the spirit.

We either put our regrets under curse, or we put them under blessing. And we put our regrets under curse by cursing ourselves until we die. We put our regrets under curse by kicking ourselves, by not letting ourselves off the hook. We put our regrets under blessing when we let God use them in the future. Put them under blessing. Put your regrets under God's blessing. Let Him use them now.

I met a father this week. He's got two grown up sons. They've got children, and he speaks to me of regret. He wasn't there for his own sons. He was an absentee father. He's been to his boys. He's confessed. He's asked for their forgiveness. It's a deep, deep regret in his life, but he's placed that regret under God's blessing. He now gives to his grandchildren a deep love, a deep love, a deep sense of his companionship. He's putting his regrets under blessing.

One of my deep regrets of the early part of my marriage is that sometimes I used to just withdraw into a terrible silence, sometimes for a day or two. I regret those wasted days. I regret them, but I've put that regret under God's blessing so that now I won't let an hour go by until I break that silence. Does that make sense? Put your regret under blessing, under blessing. Has this been helpful, friends? I think some of us are carrying very, very deep regrets. Let's acknowledge them. Don't let's pretend they're not



there. Let's open ourselves up to the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ, let's make restitution if we need to, and let's place our regrets not under curse, but under blessing.



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Can I share with you one of my favourite stories; favourite stories? It concerns an artist, Edmund Landseer, a well known artist. Some years ago at a game lodge in Scotland there was a party, and in the drinking and the dancing one of the guests spilled his drink over a painting, not the painting that you'd been thinking about the whole last week, spilt his drink over a painting, and this incredible painting was smudged and spoiled.

That night the guests went home leaving the painting spoiled and smudged. But Edmund Landseer was there. He looked at this painting, asked for some paints and some paintbrushes, and he began to repaint this picture. He took the smudges, and he took the stains, and he began to create a sunset, and a stag, and recreated this painting, and for me it's like a parable of what God does with our regrets.

Our regrets stain our lives and they smudge our lives, and God brings paintbrushes and colours, new colours, and begins to take our regrets and begins... if we allow God to do this, God begins to repaint our lives. One of my favourite songs, we sing it often in Benoni, "Something good, something beautiful, all my confusion He understood. All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife, but He made something beautiful of my life". I pray that is going to be your experience today and from today onwards.

Let's pray together. Dear God, we speak about deep things, things that touch the soul, and we ask, Lord, today, that as we reflect on the theme of regret, that Your Holy Spirit will come to us. Thank you for Paul and thank you for the way that You worked in his life. And we ask, Lord, that you would do something like that in our lives today.

Some of us, Lord, we need to look into Your eyes and we need to see that they are eyes of forgiving love. Come, Lord, make Your forgiving love known to us today, and help us, Lord, help us. Help us to place our regrets not under curse, but under blessing, Your blessing. In the name of Christ our Lord we pray, and we say together as God's people, amen, amen.

Friends, before you go, there are these strips of linen in front here, and maybe you want to name a regret. There are some kokis here as well, and you may want to choose a piece of linen and write your regret on it, and then, as a sign of placing it under God's blessing, not under curse, you may want to pin it to the tree today, as people go, as people go. You may just want to come up and do that quietly. The band will minister to us as we do that. It's been special to be with you today, friends. May the joy of Jesus Christ be with you. Have a good day, friends, God bless.

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