

The Power of Regret

By
Peter Martin
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“And Abraham journeyed from there to the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and stayed in Gerar. Now Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.”

-Genesis 20:1-2

One of the things that makes the Bible a difficult book to understand for the modern reader is the level of subtlety and nuance that the biblical authors have in comparison to the storytellers of our day. In modern Hollywood production, the writers will give the audience in depth exposition scenes that pander to the intellect of their audience and give a full account of the plot and the motives of each individual character. The Bible doesn't do this. Instead the authors of the Bible use a subtle approach and give us key details that allow us to infer motive, but we are almost never told outright. Because of this, in order to understand the Bible, we are required to meditate on the text and really ponder the motivations of the figures represented and discover what the meaning of the text is. While this is more work, there is a specific benefit to this kind of writing that Jesus explains to His followers when He explains why He teaches in parables.

“For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.”

-Matthew 13:12

Meaning that to the one who understands the profound nature of what they are reading, they will be moved to pursue greater depth and clarity from the Word of God, and the more they search, the more incredible insight and wisdom they will find. But to the one who only reads the Scriptures at a glance with no depth of understanding, even the tiny amount of understanding that they have will fade. This chapter is a good representation of this principle in action.

At a glance this chapter seems like a repeat of Genesis 12:10-20. In fact, apart from a few minor details it is almost an identical story. In both instances Abraham leaves the land that God had called him to, tells the people of the land that Sarah is his sister and not his wife for fear of his own safety. Sarah is taken into the Harem of the ruler of the land, God supernaturally stops the ruler from having sex with her, and Abraham is rebuked by the ruler for his deception. The stories are so similar in fact, that it would be

tempting to simply skip over this chapter and think of it as a repeat event. However, to do this would be to miss the deeper truths that God has planted within this text. While these texts are much the same, they are also different in key places and, if we pay attention, it can teach us a lot about the topics of grief and regret.

History Repeating Itself

As a dog returns to his own vomit, So a fool repeats his folly.

-Proverbs 26:11

One of the greatest errors we can make in our walk with God is to believe that issues that we resolve will stay buried. If we are all honest, the sins we repent of today will creep back up in our lives at various other times. For ancient man this concept was well understood. Ancient man believed that the trajectory of someone's life was more determined by the state of their soul as opposed to their intellect. They knew that learning new information was relatively easy, but the process of bringing that information into the soul in a truly transformative way was incredibly difficult and required time and effort. On top of that, they recognized that retaining that information and living in light of it through difficulties was even harder.

The majority of the Christian life is not made up of "learning" new things about God or the Bible, instead it is about "recalling" those truths and putting them into practice in our day to day struggles.

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."

-James 1:22-25

So many Christians struggle through their walks with God because they don't understand this simple truth. They think they can simply hear a profound sermon, be moved internally by it, and all of a sudden, their lives will be forever changed. This can happen, but only through an intentional and consistent exercise of the will. For Abraham, he had already learned this lesson in a profound way. I am sure that after the events of Genesis 12 he felt ashamed for his behavior and swore that he would never do this again, but in Genesis 20, he is back to making his same old errors.

This was the mistake that I made for so many years of my Christian walk. Throughout my relationship with God I have had many different struggles with many different sins, but one of my most pronounced struggles has been with lust and pornography. Each time I fell to pornography I would swear that I would never do it again, but over time, I would forget the lessons of the past and fall to the same sin again.

This repeated cycle of failure made me believe that I was making no progress in my Christian walk. That perhaps I had never learned the lesson in the first place and that really all my striving was nothing more than hypocrisy and self-deception. It reminds me of a quote from Karl Marx:

*"Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."
-Karl Marx - "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte"*

Marx, who was an absurdly evil man, believed that the reason why history tended to repeat itself was because it was all a farce. In other words, he saw the tendency for tragedies to repeat themselves as evidence that nothing ever changed in history, but that all of history was a never-ending cycle of the rich oppressing the poor in different forms. If we applied his logic to the individual, we would say that any time a person finds themselves falling to the same sin, it is evidence of their hypocrisy and unwillingness to actually change.

Whether we are conscious of this or not, I believe many people subscribe to this philosophy. I think this is why many in our culture are so quick to pathologize their behavior and seek out a definitive diagnosable mental disorder to explain their behavior. The concept of Biblical repentance is far from our minds and therefore we don't really have any hope of change, only in suppressing, or hiding, our symptoms.

Repentance

"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter."

-2 Corinthians 7:10-11

The Bible teaches a very different perspective. While the Bible does teach that an individual will have certain tendencies, (whether those are produced through a person's

innate nature or due to something that happened to them like bad parenting or some personal tragedy), those tendencies can be combated and even overcome by training the will and “renewing our minds”.

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

-Romans 12:2

“Renewing” our minds is a process of changing our thought patterns so that, by aligning our thoughts with truth, we can more consistently align our behavior with that same truth. Paul says that by doing this we can actually be “transformed”, or made into an entirely new type of person. This process is Biblically what we call repentance. It isn’t just about stopping a particular behavior, but instead about seeking a true change of heart that results in changing our minds. However, even for the truly repentant person, the struggles with the flesh will remain and we will need to regularly combat our temptations, and we might even fail in our attempts.

“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. “And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.”

-Luke 17:3-4

Notice that Jesus says that a person can actually sin and repent seven times in a day. This sounds strange to us because the biggest indicator of sincerity is seen in someone being able to actually stop a behavior, but Jesus says a person who is truly changing might still fall short. While true repentance requires genuine, observable effort, it doesn’t actually mean that we will necessarily be totally free from struggle or even falling short in a particular area. I do want to be careful here because I need to make a distinction between more severe outward sins, and the more common sins that I am talking about like lying or lusting.

If someone is, say, a drug addict, it isn’t actually good to give them this much leeway. Meaning that the expression of their sin is so powerful that any amount of indulgence is too destructive to be tolerated and it is right and good to fight for a total abstinence from that sin. But the roots of these sins, pride, lust and the like are going to persist even if the powerful manifestation is genuinely turned away from.

This is why the process of repentance is a consistent one. If the roots of our struggle never fully go away, then the manifestations of that struggle, even the more severe ones, are still a possibility for us. This is the most generous interpretation of the saying

from Alcoholics Anonymous “Once an addict always an addict.” Although most mean it in the cynical sense that I mentioned above, that a person’s nature is fixed and can only be restrained and not altered, a correct way to understand this statement is to say that someone who is repenting from their drug or alcohol addictions must stay on guard and continue to actively fight the underlying sins that move them towards indulging in substances.

And herein is the crux of the problem. Most Christians don’t want to believe that the pursuit of God is this intensive. They want to believe that pursuing God is something that they can do unconsciously, fighting sins as they come up, casually reading the Bible every now and then, and getting most of their spiritual growth from podcasts or worship music. In truth, the call of Christianity is much higher than this. We aren’t meant to merely “know” Christian truths, but to practice them on a daily basis.

“Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”

-Luke 9:23

The upward call of God on our lives is to *daily* die to ourselves and actively fight our sins. This type of upward call can’t be achieved through a weekly Sunday service, this can only happen when we commit ourselves to a daily pursuit of God and a consistent accountability to other believers. Since our issues won’t completely disappear, our repentance must be daily and our growth must be constant. Abraham might have believed that such behavior was behind him, but he was sadly mistaken and his error was almost more costly than he was willing to imagine. Remember that this story happens directly after God had given him the promise that Sarah would bear the child of promise in a year. By moving to this foreign land and giving her to this ruler, he was jeopardizing the greatest promise God had ever made to him, or anyone else for that manner. Which leads us to ask the obvious question, what could have made Abraham, in such an uncharacteristic reckless manner, endanger the greatest call of his life?

The Power of Regret

“My heart is severely pained within me, And the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling have come upon me, And horror has overwhelmed me. So I said, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. Indeed, I would wander far off, And remain in the wilderness. Selah.”

-Psalm 55:4-7

This is where the Biblical writers tend to lose modern audiences. We might expect some sort of exposition moment at the end of the chapter where Abraham “reveals” his inner world and explains his folly. But this isn’t what we see. Instead, we are expected by the author to put the pieces of Abraham’s life together and figure out why he made such a colossal blunder. And from what we know about Abraham, I think the most logical answer is that he was wracked with incredible grief over what happened to Lot.

We have to remember Abraham’s character. Although Abraham was flawed, hospitality and generosity seem to be his greatest attributes. On top of that, family is incredibly important to Abraham and care for his family drives the majority of his behavior through the Biblical text. All of this is especially true in his relationship with Lot. Remember that Abraham specifically brings his nephew Lot with him to the land of Canaan and immediately shares his land and resources with Lot. When their resources become too great for the land, Abraham is the one who makes concessions to keep the peace with Lot. When Lot’s poor decision to move to Sodom got him captured in a war, Abraham rallied his men to literally go to war with the kings of the area and get Lot back. And when Abraham learned that God was going to judge Sodom, Abraham interceded on Lot’s behalf by trying to save Sodom from judgment.

When you put these facts together it helps us understand the type of grief that Abraham must have felt when he learned about the fate of his nephew. The text is a little ambiguous in that we don’t know if Abraham learned the actual fate of Lot, (that he isolated himself in a cave and engaged in incest with his own daughters), or if Abraham just assumed that Lot was killed with the city of Sodom, but regardless, for a man who cared so much about Lot, this news would have understandably crippled him with regret and grief over what took place.

Many of us will eventually face a similar pain. This isn’t just the pain of an untimely death, but instead this is the regret one experiences when they do everything they possibly can to save a person from their own bad decisions, only to watch that person be swallowed up by the consequences of their choices. This is the kind of pain a parent would feel if a child of theirs falls into a life of prodigality and never returns to them. In many ways this form of suffering is greater than suffering under a personal ailment. Grieving over a personal misfortune is incredibly difficult, but because God has given us the ability to love others more than ourselves, we suffer most when we witness the suffering of those we love the most. Coupled with this pain is also the terrible emotion of regret.

No matter how much you, or those that love you, try to convince you that there was nothing more you could have done, there will always be a haunting thought in the back

of your head that perhaps if you would have loved that person better, listened to them more, cared for them more completely, that maybe they could have been saved. And since we are fallen, there will always be “more” that we could have done and we can never know for sure if we could have done something differently that would have made a difference. Such unanswerable questions cripple the conscience of the individual and the resulting regret can bring even the strongest of us to our knees.

Abraham and David

For most people, their first reaction to this level of regret will be to recede into themselves. We see this very clearly with Abraham. Notice that in Genesis 12, while Abraham’s behavior is still terrible, at least he discusses his plan with Sarah before he announces her as his sister. In this chapter, he doesn’t do this:

‘Now Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.’

-Genesis 20:2

Abraham doesn’t discuss this plan with his wife, he simply announces that she is his sister to all those around him. This removes any protection from her and leaves her open to be taken by the ruler of the area. This is what regret can do to most people. Feeling as though we have let people down, we can unravel and lose our way. We can forget who we are, and shrink away from those that we love.

This same type of thing happens to king David in 2 Samuel 16. David struggled with his sexuality throughout his life, and because of his polygamist behavior, he is not able to properly father his many children. One of his sons, Amnon, ends up developing an incestuous infatuation with his half sister, Tamar, and ends up raping her. David can’t bring himself to judging his son properly and essentially lets him off without any punishment. Tamar’s brother, Absalom, becomes so infuriated with his father that he murders Amnon. He then organizes a coup against his own father and tries to murder David. In this story we see David at his absolute lowest, feeling as a complete failure filled with regret that most of us could never understand. And at this moment of despair, a man begins to curse David and this is his response:

“And David said to Abishai and all his servants, “See how my son who came from my own body seeks my life. How much more now may this Benjamite? Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him. “It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing this day.”

-2 Samuel 16:11-12

While he ends his statement with a little bit of hope, the despair in David's response is palpable. The regret that he felt dried him up and caused him to doubt himself. He lost who he was in the shame of his circumstances, and it takes a lot for David to recover from this kind of hurt. Because regret can produce such powerful feelings of grief and shame, even some of the strongest and most faithful figures in the bible are cut down to nothing in the face of their regret.

Reverting Through Stress

Something that I had to learn in the marines was the effects of stress on behavior. Most tend to think that if they were in a firefight or a catastrophic event they would rise to the occasion and handle the situation well. Unfortunately, the percentage of people who can do this naturally is frighteningly small. The majority of us, when we are faced with intense emotional distress, unravel and fall back on our lowest level of training.

A simple example that shows this reality is when we run into an old friend that we haven't seen in a while. When this happens, most of us are shocked to find that, no matter how much we may have changed in the intervening years, we revert back to the personality that we had when we last spent time with that person. The reason why we do this is because, subconsciously, we are nervous about being accepted. And since we know, at some level, that this person liked us for who we *were*, it is a risk to act as we *are* and so we "fake" it.

On a larger, more serious scale, we find that this same principle is at play across our lives. So, when someone is shot at, they don't rise to the occasion, they fall back into their most familiar and well worn tactic of dealing with stress, which for most, is running away in the name of self-preservation. Military members don't train until we can do something right, we train until we literally can't do something wrong. We retrain our instincts to such a high level, that even in the midst of the highest levels of stress imaginable, we will still function correctly. For those who haven't done this, extreme distress tends to bring out their old familiar bad habits.

"If you faint in the day of adversity, Your strength is small."

-Proverbs 24:10

There are times when people who have been sober for years, find themselves falling off the wagon when they go through a distressing family situation. This is unfortunately normal human behavior. Even if we have found a lot of growth in our spiritual or mental lives, a large amount of turmoil can cause us to revert back to the people we were and act out familiar patterns of sin and vice. This is what we see happening to Abraham. In the previous chapters, Abraham was so certain of himself and his calling from God, but

after Sodom is destroyed, he finds himself running from the land that God had given him and repeating errors that he had long ago learned to avoid.

Suffering Well

The solution for the Christian is not easy, in order to avoid falling in a time of distress, it actually does matter how we are “training” ourselves when times are good. For most Christians, we only pursue God passionately when we are in times of need, but when times are good, we tend to grow stagnant in our walks with God.

“I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Philippians 4:12-13

If we want to endure the times of trial and distress, we must first learn how to be faithful in our times of prosperity. If we train ourselves in good habits of the soul when things are good, we will be faithful when times get hard. Right now I am reading through “The Hiding Place” which details the life of Corrie Ten Boom and her family. During the Holocaust, the Boom family made the heroic decision to hide Jewish people from their area. The odd thing about the book is that it doesn’t start during the Holocaust, but years before it in mundane stories about the Boom family. As odd as this seems, Corrie herself answers why she begins telling her story at this point:

“I know that the experiences of our lives, when we let God use them, become the mysterious and perfect preparation for the work. He will give us to do.”

-Corrie ten Boom - “The Hiding Place”

The Boom family didn’t all of a sudden “rise to the occasion” when the Nazi’s invaded, they instead had been “training” themselves to be the kind of people who would risk their lives for strangers. In the mundane stories that she tells, Corrie explains how her family handled tragedy and heartbreak, how they loved the people around them, sometimes at personal cost to themselves, and how they supported each other and encouraged one another’s faith. These average daily decisions are what built the character necessary to prevent this family from running from danger, and instead gave them the courage to confront evil directly and risk their own safety for those around them.

We need to learn this lesson well. Tragedy and heartache are not optional in the present age, they are mandatory. But to the one who endures suffering well, they will be ready

for the day of adversity to rise to the occasion instead of being buried by it. Every day you and I face various amounts of suffering and struggle, and depending on how we approach that suffering is how prepared we will be for times of genuine adversity.

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

-Hebrews 12:11

This all boils down to how we approach suffering. Some people approach suffering in a Stoic manner, they keep a stiff upper lip and attempt to merely endure in silence the suffering that confronts them. Others, merely deny their suffering. They fill their lives with all manner of distraction in an attempt to avoid the pain that accompanies their hardship. Some approach suffering from a karmic standpoint. They believe that suffering comes as a result of their failure, and the only way to expiate their guilt is through suffering consequences. And many more today look at suffering as an unequivocal bad. They think we were set on this earth only to prosper, and therefore any amount of suffering is useless and destructive. These people will try everything in their power to avoid suffering at all costs, and if they actually have to go through suffering they will usually lose faith, grow in resentment, and usually fall to crippling despair.

But if you notice in the above passage, none of these methods is how the Bible treats suffering. As Christians we are not meant to simply endure suffering like a Stoic, slip into denial and distraction, welcome suffering as just penalty for their evil, or reject suffering as a modern secular person. Instead, the Christian is supposed to see suffering as “training”. This doesn’t mean that God causes us to suffer in order to train us, but instead that God in His goodness takes the horrible suffering of our lives and uses it to make us more like Himself. I believe that the late pastor Timothy Keller put it best in his book “Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering”:

“Christianity teaches that, contrary to fatalism, suffering is overwhelming; contrary to Buddhism, suffering is real; contrary to karma, suffering is often unfair; but contrary to secularism, suffering is meaningful. There is a purpose to it, and if faced rightly, it can drive us like a nail deep into the love of God and into more stability and spiritual power than you can imagine.”

-Timothy Keller - “Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering

The reason why Abraham receded into himself and lost his way is because he didn’t see his suffering like this. More than likely he saw his suffering, like David, as

punishment for his failures. Instead of rising to the occasion, this caused him to revert to his former self and put his wife in danger, again. As difficult as it would have been for him, if he approached his suffering from this other perspective, if he believed that God could use his heartache and pain to make him more into the man that God had designed him to be. If he could accept in his heart that hope that God wasn't against him, but for him, that God wasn't wrathful at him and wanting to punish him, but instead that God wanted him to learn from his suffering as a loving father hopes that his children will learn through his discipline. Then he might have maintained his faith during his suffering.

In "Man's Search For Meaning", Viktor Frankl shares the prayer that got him, and many other prisoners through the Holocaust:

"Dostoevski said once, "There is only one thing I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings." These words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful."

-Viktor Frankl - "Man's Search for Meaning"

Being "worthy of our sufferings" means that we are suffering in this worthy manner. Not that we enjoy suffering like a masochist, but instead that we have become deeply acquainted with the power of the cross. That we believe that all things, including suffering, in the hands of our God can be used for good. It is this simple truth that allows Abraham to get out of his self-pity and despair. In this midst of one of his greatest failures, God not only protects Sarah from Abraham's mistake, but he visits this ruler, Abimelech, in his dream and reaffirms Abraham's position as a prophet. He then commands Abimelech to bless Abraham and have Abraham pray for him.

In this radical turn of events, God has Abraham actually pray for Abimelech to be spared from the curse that Abraham's folly put on them in the first place. This was God's not so subtle way of reminding Abraham of his calling, and reassuring him of his place in God's purposes. In our despair and regret we can believe that God is done with us. This attitude will prevent us from becoming "worthy of our sufferings". But if we can remember the supreme love of God, if we can remember His sovereign purposes that shine even through the greatest suffering, even suffering caused by our own failures, then we can become worthy of our sufferings and be brought closer to our Lord through the trials that we endure.

“And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

-Romans 5:3-5