

# Looking Backward Moves Us Forward

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

God of power and grace,  
Fill us with the wisdom and the prodding of your Word  
so that we may truly be the church:  
a transformed people with a future and a hope,  
joyfully at work in the world,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## Background

One of the major churches Paul planted was the church in Corinth. Two of his letters to this church are in the New Testament: 1 and 2 Corinthians.

We also know Paul wrote other letters to Corinth that were lost. Corinth needed a lot of attention and energy. They were definitely a high maintenance church. So Paul's relationship with the Corinthians was often conflicted—many times stormy and a bit choppy. Even the writing style in our passage reflects that.

But there was a lot invested—they worked through a lot of challenging things together. In this particular situation, Paul was wronged by someone in the Corinthian church. Unable to personally return to Corinth for a visit, Paul had to write a “sorrowful letter” delivered by his protegee Titus. It talked about the elephant in the room, rather than sweeping it under the carpet.

Having no idea how Corinth would respond, Paul anxiously awaited news. But for Paul, the risk was worth it to go through some temporary pain in order to be in a better place relationally with the church. So Titus came back with encouraging news:

upon reading Paul’s tearful letter, the Corinthian church felt godly regret—contrition. Contrition then found expression in action.

The letter achieved its purpose—fences were mended, bridges built, and obstacles removed. This brought Paul and his associates a deep sense of joy and gratitude—the temporary pain and uncomfot was worth it, because it resulted in good fruit: restoration and reconciliation of relationships in the church. Regret paved the way for a new beginning. Divine distress was at work.

*Let’s hear the word of the Lord from —*

### **Scripture: 2 Corinthians 7:5-13 (NRSV)**

<sup>5</sup>For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way—disputes without and fears within. <sup>6</sup>But God, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus, <sup>7</sup>and not only by his arrival but also by the consolation with which he was consoled about you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. <sup>8</sup>For although I grieved you with my letter, I do not regret it. Although I did regret it (for I see that that letter caused you grief, though only briefly), <sup>9</sup>now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance, for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us. <sup>10</sup>For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death. <sup>11</sup>For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter. <sup>12</sup>So although I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong, nor on account of the one who suffered the wrong but in order that your zeal for us might be made known to you before God. <sup>13</sup>In this we have found consolation.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – Looking Backward Moves Us Forward

It was October 24, 1960 and the most famous entertainer in France and one of the most well-known singers in the world was not doing well. Edith Piaf was only forty-four years old, but her body was racked from addiction, accidents, and hard living.

Composer Charles Dumont came to Piaf's posh Paris apartment to play a composition she may want to record. Now Edith considered Charles a second-rate composer. She made him wait most of the day in her reception room. Finally, late that night, she came out in a blue dressing gown. "You may play one song and one song only. That's it."

Dumont nervously sat down at the diva's piano. With a sweaty brow and jittering fingers, he began to tickle the ivories and softly spoke the lyrics. Edith had a serious look on her face. Play it again. Did you write this? She then gathered friends to listen. After that she got her house cleaners to come and listen. Edith Piaf continued playing the song over and over—more than twenty times that night. She called the record executive. A few weeks later she sang the 2:19 long song on French TV. She performed it again live—receiving twenty-two curtain calls. By the end of the year, it had sold more than a million copies. Three years later she was dead.

In English the song goes:

*No, nothing at all.  
No, I regret nothing at all.  
It's paid, swept away, forgotten.  
I couldn't care less about the past.*

However, it is reported at her deathbed, Piaf had a different tune, muttering,  
"Every damn thing you do in this life you have to pay for."

Evidently, Edith had regrets after all. And she's not alone. A recent study found that 82% of Americans occasionally feel regret in their lives. Daniel Pink, in his incredibly helpful new book "*The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*" helps us understand and utilize this important emotion better. The emotion of regret isn't really developed until age six. Regret is the most often experienced negative emotion, and the second most experienced of all emotions. Guess the only emotion we feel more than regret? **Love.**

What regrets do you have? I'll open up and share a few of mine: It was one of my first jobs when I was in high school. A wonderful person from my home church owned a cleaning business. He gave me a cleanup job. At one particular home I needed to shampoo the carpeting of some stairs. In my zest to suck out all the dirt, I ended up scraping paint all along the wall of the stairs. I never got a call back for another job. I'm embarrassed to this day, but it inspires me to do good and careful work.

Another regret I have is using my introversion as an excuse not to meet more new people, particularly in high school. I wish I pushed myself more to have a greater number of friends and experiences. I regret missing an opportunity in seminary to attend a lecture given by world

renown theologian Jurgen Moltmann. I regret not seeing in concert one of my favorite bands REM before they hung up the towel. Looking back over these fourteen years at Immanuel, I regret certain times that I missed out on pastoral connections with others because of busyness or shyness or just my humanity. To regret is to be human. And I am definitely human.

There are generally **FOUR DIFFERENT KINDS OF REGRETS:**

**FOUNDATION REGRETS:** These are regrets we have for not being responsible, conscientious, or prudent. Failures of foresight: overvaluing the NOW and undervaluing the LATER. Regrets that I only played and didn't do the work. Foundation regrets deal with responsibility and personal discipline. I wasted my money and didn't invest for retirement. I drank too much. Didn't exercise enough.

With foundation regrets you're paying now because of too much playing when you should have been preparing.

**BOLDNESS REGRETS:** This is where we regret a missed opportunity. We failed to take action and missed out. We played it safe. Fear ruled the day. Didn't take that leap of faith. Chickened out. Didn't take that risk—and as a result lost out. Life could have been so much fuller.

Boldness regrets deal with personal growth.

**MORAL REGRETS:** These regrets involve choices we made that went against our conscience, beliefs, or God's commands.

*Something we stole.*

*Being disloyal to a spouse or friend.*

*Someone we bullied as a child.*

If only I did the right thing.

This regret deals with goodness, falling short, and missing the mark.

**CONNECTION REGRETS:** These regrets involve either a RIFT or DRIFT in relationships—with a spouse, a friend, or family member.

*If only I'd reached out or kept in touch with that high school friend.*

This regret deals with love.

The interesting thing is we need regret in our lives. Not feeling regret or remorse causes big problems in our lives. The question is—what kind of regret will we have? Will we choose a regret that brings life—a godly grief, as Paul says? The fruit of this regret brings maturity, growth, wisdom, and healthy relationships. Or will we choose a regret that only brings sorrow and self-recrimination—that's worldly grief.

Which one do you want to choose in your life?

Which grief have you been choosing—good grief or bad grief?

**REGRET** is a grace, a gift when it leads to change and improvement. Regret can redirect our path—if we learn from our mistakes. It sharpens our decision-making skills in the future. Improves our performance. Strengthens our sense of meaning and connection with others.

I like how one person put it, saying that regret seems to “crack open the door to possibilities.”

Godly regret makes life more thoughtful and flavorful. We can't erase the past or its consequences, but we can be better by mistake. Moving forward, things can be better.

We do have to be careful with regret, however. Too much regret, the wrong kind of regret, worldly regret as Paul describes it, is different.

Repetitive and looping regret leads to brooding, wallowing, rumination, and beating yourself up. You get stuck in the swamp of shame rather than learning from your mistakes. You're not only stuck, this regret makes you regress. Regret that smothers you is worldly grief. Regret that pokes you is godly grief. Here's another word for godly grief: REPENT!

Godly grief returns to God for forgiveness and a new start. It turns toward others, rather than against them. So, swallow your pride. Admit you're not perfect and you need help. We're all in the same boat. Try something different, don't repeat mistakes and previous patterns. Be open to feedback from God and others, don't be defensive. Stay open—optimize your regret, rather than minimizing it. Don't waste the learning or growing opportunity.

Journal about your regrets— don't let them fester into anger, bitterness, shame, or hopelessness. Vent in appropriate and healthy ways. Make amends where you can. Talk to a pastor, mentor, or trusted friend. Go into therapy. Check yourself into rehab. There's no shame in that act of courage.

I'm intrigued by this practice I heard about in Daniel Pink's book mentioned earlier:

Each year do not only a NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION on Jan. 1st, Do an OLD YEAR'S REGRET the day before on Dec. 31st. Learn from a mistake in the previous year.

He gives another helpful suggestion:

Switch from IF ONLYs to AT LEASTs. Instead of saying, “If only I didn't marry that jerk,” say this, “Marrying this person was a mistake... but at least I have these great kids.”

Or “Buying that car was a mistake, but at least it's paid off.”

The sting of a mistake is a memorable teacher for future similar decisions. Regret reminds you you're not doomed to repeat history. It helps you avoid the insanity of doing the same thing over and over thinking you'll get different results. Some divine distress for a season is good. But please, stop beating yourself up. Extend some self-compassion. Perfectionism is a merciless, ruthless, and unrelenting master.

Remember this beautiful line from our passage:

*God brings comfort to the downcast. God encourages the discouraged.*

If God forgives you, surely you forgive yourself.

To repent involves change. There's a Chinese proverb that says: The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second-best time is TODAY. Ask God for help to turn over a new leaf—today. Ask God to give you the desire to desire change. Or as King David says in the Psalms, *"Create a clean heart in me O God."*

This is life-giving regret. It doesn't suck your soul dry. The good news is your history doesn't have to be your destiny. Godly regret leads to discipline and healthy habits, not disappointment. Engagement, not passivity. So, err on the side of showing up, apologizing, connecting, being adventurous.

Studies show that if you're introverted and push yourself to be more extroverted and adventurous, you're all the better for it. It won't damage you. You'll have fewer regrets. This is one I'm working on. Accept God's redemption. Trust in Christ, not yourself. Lean into the new you. In Christ Jesus you are *"a new creation."* The old is gone. *"Behold, 'I make all things new.'"*

From Paul, we learn when we have the courage to resolutely face our challenges and have resolution, we have a deep sense of peace and joy. We feel encouraged. Life is more meaningful and satisfying. Learn from the past. Remember the past. Reminisce, but don't fall into nostalgia. In other words, don't live in the past. You can't freeze and preserve a bygone era in the present. It only leads to resentment and frustration. Nostalgia worships at the altar of an idealized past, that never really existed. The truth is things change. People change. Worldly regret tries to keep everything the same and it allows no breathing room for change or growth. We move forward by looking backward.

I'd like to close with a true story from Tom Holland's 2019 landmark book: *"Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World."* In this excellent book, I learned about one of my new favorite figures in church history.

It was 1514 and Spanish colonist and priest Bartolome de las Casas's life was turned upside down. He had a sudden, heart-stopping insight on Pentecost Sunday: his enslavement of Indians was a grave sin that grieved the heart of God.

Like Paul on the Damascus Road, and St. Augustine in the garden, Bartolome de las Casas found himself born again. In regret for his past, he repented in the present and changed moving forward. De las Casas not only immediately freed his slaves, but he devoted himself from that moment to defending the Indians from tyranny. All people, including Indians, were made in God's image. Therefore, *"they are our brothers,"* said de la Casas, *"and Christ gave his life for them."*

On one side of the Atlantic he plead his case to the royal court. On the other side of the Atlantic, he spoke to slaveholders. *"Who are the true barbarians?"* said the former slaveholder, *"The Indians, a people gentle, patient, and humble? Or the Spanish conquerors who lusted for gold and silver?"*

As an old man, de las Casas stayed open. He had a second experience of powerful conviction: He realized slavery was evil not only for Indians, but for Africans too. For years he thought Africans sold into slavery were convicts and they were only suffering punishment for their crimes. But late in life he discovered a terrible truth: Africans were unjustly enslaved, victims just like the Indians. His regret led to further change: He spoke out again on behalf of Indian and African alike: Every single person, Christian or not, had *derechos humanos* "human rights."

De la Casas was ahead of his time in the 1500s. He experienced godly sorrow leading to life. Previously went on slave raids and military expeditions against Indians. After his spiritual awakening, he spent the last 50 years fighting slavery and became known as the "*Protector of Indians*." That's godly regret. De la Casa is one of the great figures in church history you've never heard of. It's regrettable the church didn't really listen to him in the 1500s. May we all learn from him today.

Let's learn from our regrets  
Using them redemptively  
That we may live more mature and fruitful lives  
That bless others and glorify God.

Amen.

Sermon Art: Artistic Photo by [Marc-Olivier Jodoin](#)

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