

Victory Secured, Regret Engaged

2 Samuel 18:1-19:8

*For **godly grief produces** a repentance that leads to salvation **without regret**, whereas **worldly grief produces death***

Introduction: With the risk of dragging you down a bit to start our study fully realized, think with me about the **saddest words or phrases in the English language**: “It’s tax day!”, “Dodgers (or Seahawks, or Rams, or...) WIN”, “there’s no more coffee”, “In-n-out is closing”, or “more money for high speed rail”. Or we have real sad words: Good-bye, I’m lonely, it’s cancer, I want a divorce, “I regret to inform you...” But I believe that the saddest of words, at least in the top 10, have to do with **regret**. “*IF ONLY, IF ONLY...these are the saddest words in the English language.*”¹ If we let ourselves, we can all relate to the sting of regret, the “If only I had”, “I wish”, “It might have been”, “I should/could have”, as we evaluate our present in light of our past. How much would life be different if we could get into a time machine and change a decision, not engage in that activity, say “no” to that sin, or take another path.

Bronnie Ware, a palliative care nurse for many years, wrote a book from her experiences in walking through the last stages of life and death with people called, “*The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*”, which were (now you don’t have to read the book):

- "I **wish** I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."
- "I **wish** I hadn't worked so hard (or much)."
- "I **wish** I'd had the courage to express my feelings."
- "I **wish** I had stayed in touch with my friends."
- "I **wish** that I had let myself be happier."

Whether or not you resonate with these, it is clear that regret is a part of sadness, a sorrow that looks back and affects our present and perhaps our future. Regret is one of those common experiences of the human condition, like **complaining or selfishness**, that we all deal with and that affect us negatively. Regret is crafty because it can work on us when everything else can currently be positive or go well, and it is deeply **personal**, since not everyone will feel the same level of regret, since each situation is tailored specifically for us. If this is true, **how we deal with regret is highly important**, since it can be crippling to our ability to move forward, to see God and ourselves clearly and Biblically, and can absolutely **steal our joy**.

As we come back to David, we find him in the crosshairs of regret. In a chapter that sees a **massive, providential, and unlikely victory**, we see the sadness of a king pour out where happiness could have been. We see the paralyzing effects of regret and life that is **complicated with competing emotions**. God brought Him through the rebellion and kept His promise to David, but it came at the death of his son Absalom. Absalom’s death was absolutely a result of **his own** choices and rebellion, but it also was part of the consequences of David’s own sin (2 Sam. 12:11), and perhaps even the culmination of passive parenting. This creates **tension in our mind and heart**, not only with how God operates and how His sovereignty and our choice work together, but we feel the same sting in life as we thank God for where

¹ Michael A. Milton, *Songs in the Night: How God Transforms our Pain to Praise*, p. 211

He has brought us, but know it could have been different/better. This is why the governing verse in this whole section of Scripture is found back in **2 Sam. 17:14b**:

*“For the Lord had **ordained** to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, **so that the Lord might bring harm upon Absalom.**”*

God’s plans cannot be thwarted, there is rightful and just punishment for sin and unbelief, and God is gracious and forgiving to sinners. All of these work together, and when we understand them, they do not leave us with a headache, but hope, not questioning but rest, not merely tension but convictional belief.

We left David on the run last week with Absalom gathering a massive force to bring the battle to David with the goal to wipe him out along with his whole group of loyalists. Getting the message from Hushai, he crossed over the Jordan and set up defensive shop at the stronghold of **Mahanaim**, where he received aid from three locals who were loyal to David and risked for him (2 Sam. 17:24-29). Hushai had bought David the time he had hoped for, and allowed him to do what he did best: *prepare for battle*.

Overwhelming Victory (18:1-8)

*And the king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, “**Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.**” And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders about Absalom.*

As David prepared for the coming onslaught of a much greater force than he possessed, a few things stand out: 1) David had picked up troops along the way, allowing him to split his forces into three, each having sub-groups of hundreds and thousands. His generals were trusted and seasoned: **Abishai** (Joab’s brother), **Ittai the Gittite**, and **Joab**. 2) The three groups allowed David to determine not only the field of battle – fighting on his terms – but allowed for flexibility, being freed up to move units and platoons as needed. 3) David’s men were **extremely** loyal and had NOT turned their back on him nor lowered their respect for him. In fact, as David said he’d lead from the front into battle, his men compelled him to stay behind. “If we flee or die, they won’t care. It’s you they’re after. *You are worth 10,000 of us.*” 4) The Bible is SPARSE on the details of this great battle, but it is clear – David’s forces won in a ROUTE! The text says that 20,000 men died, and this was a result of the sword, arrow, and spear of war, but also the fact that the battle took place next to a thick forest, shrinking the advantage of numbers and making sure the *Ents* were involved – and it says the forest devoured more men than the sword that day.

Think about the turn of events. Just a short time ago David was on the run, having his own son stage a coup and winning the hearts and minds of almost all the people, his throne stolen and his concubines ravaged. Had Absalom taken the advice of Ahithophel, David could easily have met his demise from 12,000 soldiers overwhelming him at night. *But God clearly had other plans.*

But it is also clear that what consumed David’s thinking was not his men, the plan, or the outcome, but for his son. He made it abundantly clear as to his intentions to his generals and all the people – **deal gently, for my sake, with the young man Absalom**. Despite his rebellion, sin, and grievous actions, David still did not want his son to die as a result.

Underwhelming Death (18:9-18)

*Then Joab blew the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained them. **17 And they took Absalom and threw him into a great pit in the forest and raised over him a very great heap of stones.** And all Israel fled every one to his own home. **18 Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken***

and set up for himself the pillar that is in the King's Valley, for he said, "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance." He called the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's monument to this day.

For David to win, Absalom had to die. David tried to circumvent it, find another way, or have victory without it, but it was inevitable and deserved. Absalom's demise was swift and sad, moving from the top of the world to the bottom of the heap in a few short days. Remember, Absalom was a man without blemish, with looks and hair to be desired by all, a skilled orator and strategic planner who used his wit and sexual promiscuity to secure power. In other words, he used all the worldly tools and resources to reach the top, but that pathway is ALWAYS SHORT LIVED, since it cannot counter the **providential hand of God**. *What was Absalom's condition as he met death?*

1. He was **ALONE** – When you can get someone to follow you through deception, wit, or charm, it will be as shallow as water on a plate. As the battle raged and the inexperienced leaders were losing, Absalom's army did not say to him what the mighty men said to David (get behind, you are worth more than us), but we see Absalom **alone, most likely fleeing the battle by himself**.
2. He had nothing to **SAY** – The whole chapter sees Absalom as a main figure, but he actually is given no dialogue. He had gained power but no influence, and his words were of no consequence. Power, prestige, money, and accomplishment are quickly forgotten when they are gained by their own strength and for their own glory
3. He died in **REBELLION** – There is great irony in his death. As he rode out of the battle alone, he got caught in the low hanging branches of an oak tree. Though the text doesn't say it, we'd like to think he got caught by his flowing locks, the same that gained him the admiring looks of people. His mule, the animal ridden by kings, left him dangling, much like the kingdom being taken away. As one of the soldiers saw him, he dared not lift a finger, because he **knew what David had commanded** (19:12). But Joab would have none of it. In both rebellion against David's command and logical, convictional action, Joab took three spears and ran Absalom through, ending his life. Then 10 more young men took their turn on the sadistic piñata.
4. He had no **LEGACY** – It is significant that Absalom died hanging from a tree. **Deuteronomy 21** sheds light on this. A rebellious son in Israel who would not obey but became a glutton and drunkard would be brought out to the elders and would die by stoning, purging the evil from their midst! (Deut. 21:19-21) On top of this, if the rebellious son would have committed a crime punishable by death, they would **hang him on a tree before burying him the same day**. **"For a hanged man is cursed by God."** (21:23). This was Absalom. A rebellious son, worthy of death, and cursed by God. As they took him out of the tree, they put him in a pit and covered him with stones rather than bring him back across the Jordan to be buried in his homeland. This is reminiscent of **Joshua 7** when Israel had to deal with the sin of Achan in the Valley of Achor after he and his family was stoned and burned for breaking faith with God and having stones heaped over them.

The sad end of Absalom is even more striking as we find in verse 18 that he had created a monument to himself in order to have a legacy to be remembered. Somewhere along the way, his three sons had died (2 Sam. 14:27) and he had no son to continue his line. So like all prideful narcissists, he tried to make people remember him through building a monument to himself. Here is the reality: *any striving apart from God in rebellion against him will leave us hopeless and void*. We may see temporal gain, but the

only way to truly have gain in the future is to look on the One who became a true curse on a tree (Gal. 3:13-14) to offer us hope through the forgiveness of our sin!

Overwhelming Grief (18:19-33)

*And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! **Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!**"*

The battle was over, victory secured, and trumpet was blown (2 Sam. 18:16), and the bloodshed could stop. Now was a time to give thanks, return praise, and assess the losses. However, one duty still hung in the balance. **David needed to be told.** With youthful zeal and vigor, young **Ahimaaz**, the son of Zadok the priest and one who risked his life bringing David the message of Absalom's mounting advance, volunteered to bring the news. But Joab wisely deferred the job to another, a foreigner and unnamed Cushite. As the Cushite ran off, the stubborn young Ahimaaz was not satisfied, and finally convinced Joab to let him run anyway.

As David was sitting between the city gates awaiting news, he saw the first man coming, knowing that means news of the battle was coming. Then he saw another man running, and the first was identified as someone he knew in **Ahimaaz**, and David thought that since he was known and a good man, the news must be good (2 Sam. 18:24-27 – and he must have been pretty fast)!

Having reached David first, which he believed was an honor, he gave the news: *"All is well. God has delivered you from those who raised up against you!"* **"And what about Absalom?"** was David's response, to which the convictional young man turned to jelly: *"There was so much commotion, I'm not sure exactly what happened."* For the sake of time, we won't dwell on this half-hearted response by a young man, but suffice to say he was not ready in his character to say the hard thing to someone, and was unwilling to speak the truth in love. He left that to a non-Israelite.

The man from Cush gave the same message of victory, which prompted David's question about Absalom, and here the man showed deft clarity: *"May the enemies of my Lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man."* (18:32) He did not mention Absalom nor death, but the message was clear. Expectedly, David was upset, sad, and in anguish, but the text is particularly effusive in his mourning, and it began to affect those around him, the nation, his soldiers, and the future of the kingdom. There are **three types of cries that we see here, and they are descriptive of what David was going through and instructive to us as we face grief today.**

THE CRY OF LOSS

This is the most understandable, common, and needed reaction and response to the message of the death of a loved one, especially one as close as a son. Again, David had experienced loss of children already, including his child born to Bathsheba in adultery and his son Amnon who was killed in vengeance by Absalom, so his life had known grief. As a parent, it does not matter if our children lived up to expectations or were wayward, their death brings grief! I'm sure David remembered when Absalom was little, when they had innocent fun and times as a family as tears filled his eyes. Even our Savior Jesus taught us about grief and the cry of loss when he wept over the death of Lazarus, his friend, and whom He would raise from the dead (see John 11:33-42). When we do not allow ourselves to mourn

over loss, we shortcut a needed process. Mourning over loss is NOT a lack of faith, especially when we mourn as those who have hope (see 1 Thess. 4:13)

THE CRY OF REGRET

But it also seems clear that David was mourning differently than before. This was more than deep sadness, this moved into **regret, or the type of sadness that sees oneself as the cause**. David knew what Absalom had done and what he deserved, but he also knew the part he played in the whole scenario, both directly and indirectly. This is where life gets **complicated and messy**, where everything can seem to be going well on the outside or externally, but we are dying inside. This is where we need to take everything in life and allow the grace and truth of God to inform and transform. Here is how David's **mourning of regret** was a negative, rather than a positive, response:

1. It was **self-focused and isolating – Regret looks inward and backward rather than upward and forward**. When David cried out that he wished he would have died instead of Absalom, he echoed the sentiment of every parent who would rather suffer or die rather than their child. But here, there was more to it at play. David was in desperate need of a **friend like Jonathan**, one who had a track record of speaking truth to his friend (1 Sam. 20:12-21). As he isolated more from his men and gave illogical commands, he got further augured into his regret. It was not until an unlikely friend came in the form of Joab that David could move from thinking about himself to realizing his responsibility. Remember, the way out of regret is NOT focusing on yourself, but fixing your eyes on Christ and beginning to serve and pray for others, and interacting with them.
2. It was **paralyzing** – One of the results of David's constant refrain of "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son" was that David was completely paralyzed to move forward. His army had won a battle but the war was still going. The men felt slighted, and instead of shouts of victory, they became like ones who lost. They risked their lives for David, and now they felt shame, like they had done something wrong. They felt like David **hated them**, and that he would have been happier if they had died and Absalom had lived, and they would not take it for very long. Now, perhaps Joab embellished a little here, but you can see how the men, who were reeling themselves, seeing their own brothers, fathers, and sons fall in battle in the belief they were fighting for their **king, only to see him wilt and turn his back on them**. When sorrow paralyzes us, we know it has turned into a fleshly response rather than one of faith.
3. It allowed **emotions to rule and justify** – Emotions and affections are powerful gifts God has bestowed on humanity, and they can be used to glorify God or can rule our lives. David had allowed the **FEELINGS of REGRET to rule and justify**. Instead of doing and believing what he knew was true, he gave into what was going on in his heart and mind. All of the accusations of Joab would certainly be argued and defended by David on any given day, but the reality remained that David's actions validated the concern. Our emotions can deceive: "*No one understands!*" "*No one has it THIS bad!*" "*If you only knew, you wouldn't say this to me.*" Or our emotions can try to bring us out of tension by **blaming God for what's happened, or by us taking zero responsibility for what has gone on**. The answer to our battle with regret is to double down on our faith in a sovereign, good, and merciful God.

4. It dichotomized **life and faith** – Every time David cut out the truth of God’s Word, or knowledge of how God truly operates, or walked by faith, hopelessness and regret would rule. The greatness of the **gospel, the Word of God, and the work of the Spirit** is the fact that God takes all of life, all of our external actions, fears, regrets, shame, bad choices, frustrations, misunderstandings, hurts, sins, and those things we haven’t told anyone, and **redeems, restores, reconciles, and redirects them all by His grace through Jesus Christ**. Does that mean pain is gone or sadness goes away?! By no means. But it does mean that we do not have to lock away anything or simply try not to think about it. We can face it by grace through faith, knowing that God is sovereignly in control of all, so that we can say:

*For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to **salvation without regret**, whereas worldly grief produces death (2 Cor. 7:10)*

THE CRY OF LONGING

This means that the real cry of our heart is for God – **“The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit** (Psalm 34:18) – who will one day wipe away every tear, and bring us into His presence to live forever without mourning, pain, or tears (Rev. 21:1-5), since Jesus is making all things new. This does not mean we won’t have scars, but all regret and sorrow and pain will be no more.

Concluding Principles:

1. **Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.** (Prov. 27:6) – In times of mourning and sorrow that can turn to regret, we need to BE and SURROUND OURSELVES with truth tellers, who will point us back to Scripture, especially when it is not what we want to hear in the moment. Yes, there is a time to sit and wait, but there are other times to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and may we have the discernment to know when to exercise this.
2. **God’s Will is perfect and will not be thwarted, and that is good news** – When we cannot make sense of the tension and complication of life, we are in the best place when we rest in the arms of God who knows all things and delivers on all things.
3. **Where David failed, Christ succeeds** – David, in all of his maturity and faith, failed to lead and allowed his own failure and decisions to cause him to wilt. But we have a Savior who was **rejected by His own people, a man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross and despised the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God** (Heb. 12:2). He did this for the sake of joy and to uphold the perfection of God. He saved us knowing all the crud of our past, the things we’ve done and should have done, so that we too could stop living in regret and instead live in *convictional faith, dogged and determined trust, and in light of grace lavished on us, so that:*

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, **let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith** – Heb. 12:1-2a*

Let’s run **without regret**, looking up at Jesus and run the race ahead, together, by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.