

“How To Stop Hitting Your Head”

Psalm 51

Series: Starting Over Week 3: Release Your Regrets

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January 21, 2018

BAMM! OW! I did it again. Hit my head. I don't know which is worse: the blinding pain from the knock on my noggin or the embarrassment of running into the wall for the thousandth and one time. The upstairs bedroom in our house was once an attic. A previous owner turned it into a spacious bedroom. For years it was my son's room. Now it is my office where I write my sermons. The renovations, however, left one piece in place: a very low wall over the stairs. I mean low. So low it hits me on the bridge of my nose. That's low. Over the years I got used to it. I learned to avoid the head on collision. Yet when a visitor went up to the bedroom – the exterminator, AC repair guy, my son's extremely tall father-in-law – we'd warn them to duck. Unfortunately, without fail, I'd hear “BAMM!” and then “Darn!” only they didn't say “Darn.” They forgot. And I'd smile. Okay. I know. It's not right to take pleasure in other's pain. But there has to be some advantage to being short.

Regret – it's like hitting your head against the wall. Yes, regrets cause us **Pain**. In this series “Starting Over: Living Beyond Your Regrets” we've looked at Regrets of Action – “I wish I didn't do that” – Regrets of Inaction – “I wish I did that” and Regrets of Reaction – “I wish that wasn't done to me.” You may actually be carrying all three of these. Those regrets inflict pain. Yet regrets also have a **Pattern**. I'm sure you've heard a person say, “Why do I keep hitting my head against the wall?” Hopefully you won't be saying that after the Eagles game tonight. When someone says this either they live in a split-level house like mine or they are regretting a recurring pattern of action, inaction or reaction.

- “I told myself just one drink. I don't remember how many I had or how I got here.”
- “This year I will change. This year I will stick to my resolutions. Yet here I am back to my old behaviors.”
- “The next time this happened I was going to stand up and speak up for myself. But I gave in...again.”

Dave and Jon Ferguson call this pattern “The Sorry Cycle.” We long for an abundant life. These longings are not bad. Some are created by God. The problem arises when we fulfill these longings apart from God with earthly things which can never satisfy them. This leads to regret. The pain of regret triggers more longing. Now we are stuck in the pattern, the Sorry Spin-Cycle, of longing and regret. We keep hitting our head against the wall without a clue of how to break free. In this series, Starting Over, we want to give you the tools to get off the Sorry-Go-Round. A New Year is the best time to break out of the pain and the pattern of regret, to stop hitting your head against the wall, and start the new life God wants for you.

The first week, Linda Marr showed us we don't need to fear our regrets. In fact we can learn to **Love Our Regrets** if we use them as an opportunity to turn to God for help. Last week, Scott Burgess taught us how to **Recognize Our Regrets**. Denial and pride blind us. David may be the greatest king of the Old Testament but he even he messes up royally. He thinks he can hide his affair with Bathsheba, his murder of her husband Uriah. Yet God, through the prophet Nathan, confronts the king and rips away the blinders.

Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." (2 Samuel 12:13). David recognizes his sin and begins the journey to stop hitting his head and start over.

How do you stop hitting your head? How do you **Release Your Regrets?** Let me take you back to the low hanging wall over the stairs to my office. I put up with that for twenty-three years until last fall when I finally decided I was done with it. Starting Over begins with a **Decision**. There needs to be a decision to change. Recognizing my regrets is important but not enough. I must do something about it. I've had it with hitting my head. I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to be free.

After Nathan confronted David with his sin, the king wrote down on paper his decision to change. Today we call it Psalm 51. It begins with David's confession to God.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight (Psalm 51:1-4)

What an honest, anguished plea. David cries out from the pit of his pain. He is finally and fully aware of his sin. He knows his sin. It's always in front of him. He decides to be done with it and he knows he needs God's help and forgiveness.

What wall bears the dent of your head? What have you been putting up with for years? On the insert in your bulletin I invite you to write, for your eyes only, your decision to change. It can be a word, a phrase, a picture, a sentence. What regret has you in its grip? What pain, what pattern needs to stop? What are you sick and tired of? Fighting with your spouse or child? Financial struggles? The swamp of self-pity? A destructive habit? Decide today to be done with it and ask God for the power to break free. God does not want this in your life just as He did not want sin and regret in David's life. A decision begins to break the pattern so you can start over.

Yet this decision is only the beginning. The next step is **Investigation**. Do some investigation behind the wall. I was able to climb into my attic and investigate what lay behind the low-hanging wall in my office. It was a mess of crisscrossed rafters, plywood, fiberglass insulation and wiring. No wonder they left the wall there. If you want to remove the wall that hits your head, you must investigate and uncover what's holding it up. David takes a good long look at what's inside him.

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. (Psalm 51:5-6)

To discover the roots of our pattern, the cause of our regrets, we have to go back – sometimes way back. David went all the way back to the womb. Believe it or not, some sins and secrets are passed down from one generation to the next. Our purpose is not to shift the blame to someone else. The point is to identify the hidden beams and 2x4s that keep causing us pain. We need to find, as David says, the truth about what's going on in our inner parts.

One way to uncover what's behind the wall is to do some troubleshooting by asking yourself these questions:

- **Do you regret committing a sin?** David talks a lot about sin in his confession. What is sin? In the Bible it's whatever breaks a relationship. We sin against God and against others. What did I do that causes distance between me and the Lord or me and a neighbor, friend, classmate, coworker or loved one? Have I broken one or several of God's commandments?

- **Do you regret hurting someone?** It could be a careless word, a sarcastic remark, a shouting match. It can be something you did or failed to do. Maybe the hurt happened this morning on the way to church. Maybe it happened years ago, you try to bury it, but it just won't go away.
- **Do you regret making a mistake?** What you did is not a sin but you just can't stop kicking yourself. Every time it comes up you wince, shake your head, unleash the hounds of negative talk in your head. It's an error, a blunder, an accident.
- **Do you regret being hurt by someone?** This is different from the others. The hurt was done to you. You were dumped, betrayed, let go from the team or work. Someone was cruel, mean, perhaps even abusive. This one may be easy to identify but hard to release. It holds power over you even if it was done a long time ago.
- **Do you regret pain you feel from life circumstances?** You have an illness such as cancer or alcoholism. A fire or flood strikes your home. Sometimes there is no one to blame. It's just life. But you still regret it.

In his Starting Over Story, Greg identified family problems that were behind the scenes of his drinking. Yet even when those were resolved he didn't realize he's still an alcoholic. He can't drink like other people. His denial of this problem took him deeper into regret.

So what comes after investigation? **Demolition.** Start demolishing the barrier that blocks your way. One day I took a hammer and smashed through that wall. At first it felt good to attack the obstacle which caused me so many minor concussions. Yet it proved to be a much tougher job. There was a lot to cut away. Now that you identified what is behind your head-banging barrier, you will need to do the hard work of **Forgiveness.** If you sinned against God or someone, if you hurt someone or made a mistake you need to ask forgiveness. That's what David did:

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. (Psalm 51:7, 9)

It's hard work to make amends and reconcile with someone. In the middle of seeking forgiveness you might be tempted to justify, argue, defend or explain away your actions. Don't give into those temptations. Simply admit you were wrong and ask to be forgiven. You might fear their reaction, their rejection, even their refusal to forgive you. It happens. But that's beyond your control. Your job and mine is to demolish the barriers which cause our regret, which keep hitting our heads. At least we know when it comes to God, He always forgives. The Apostle John says,

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:8-9)

It's also hard to offer forgiveness to someone who's hurt us deeply. You may find it hard to forgive yourself. You might be blaming God for the disasters or diseases in your life. As hard as it is, if you refuse to forgive you will keep hitting your head against the same painful regrets. The one you hurt is yourself. The Bible tells,

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

So who do you need ask to forgive you? Who do you need to forgive? Write down the names.

After demolition, the work is only half done. Next comes **Reconstruction.** You must reconstruct a new frame for how to live in the future. It would look terrible for me to leave a big gaping hole in my ceiling. So I built a frame to hold the drywall. Why do so many people fall

back into their regrets? Why do so many New Year's Resolutions fail? Why do people get back on the Sorry-Cycle even after they let go and seek forgiveness? They never built a new frame for their new life. Call it a new frame of mind. David asks God to help him with this:

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Psalm 51:10-12)

What 2x4s do you need in your frame?

- Prayer: Talk to the Lord every day about your regrets – especially when they rise up and threaten to knock you on the head. Are you praying daily?
- Worship: All week long regrets build up and become overwhelming. Gathering here each week reminds you there is a God who is more powerful than your regrets. Worship causes every huge problem to shrink back to its normal size.
- Groups: God made us for community. We need each other. We are better together. Other believers help you see the truth and can help do the hard work of demolishing those hidden barriers. Support groups like Griefshare or recovery groups like a 12 step fellowship may also be needed.
- A Guide: You need at least one trusted, Christian friend with whom you can be completely honest and who has your permission to be completely honest with you about what to do. This should be someone outside your family. It can be a pastor, a mentor, a therapist, a sponsor. It should be someone who is farther along in their walk of faith.

Write down your plan for Reconstruction. When and where will you pray each day? Will you make a commitment to worship each week? Do you have a Growth Group or a Support Group? Most important: write the name of who you want to be your Guide.

Once I finished reconstructing and raising the walls over my stairs, I noticed an amazing phenomenon: despite the higher ceiling, I still automatically ducked my head...every time. Twenty-three years of training taught me to bow in fear before that wall.

Make no mistake: Your regrets will not give up easily. They have trained you to bow in fear before them. And if you don't build a new frame and rely on your new support structure of God and other people, I guarantee you will find yourself back on the Sorry-Go-Round.

The stakes are high. The cost is great. It will get worse. But it doesn't have to. With God's help and the help of your support structure, you don't have to duck your head any more. Hold your head up and walk forward into the future God planned for you. Join us next week as we learn to Redeem Our Regrets.

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.

⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.

¹⁴ Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

¹⁵ Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

¹⁷ My sacrifice, O God, is ^[b] a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.