

Regret in the Human Psyche

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Introduction

The famous comedian, Robbin Williams (2014), last words on video just days before committing suicide: “The only people who *don’t look back with regret are idiots and psycho paths*. I got a lifetime of regrets, boy. Why? But why? I mean, what kind of God; what kind of world. It’s a stinking con game. You grow up being told: ‘pay for the suites and the roses.’ Then they hit you with a pick axe in the ear. They say, ‘you pass through it...’ they say, ‘don’t you hate me; let it go.’ Anger is the only thing they left me. I love you. That’s my rock bottom; that’s my beautiful. My damn and naked soul. I was wrong. I hope you can forgive me.”

Williams was obviously a tortured soul bound up with regret and self-loathing about so many things we will never know, but is clear is that something went horrible wrong in his life, and as a human being, he experienced a tragic denouement. Prior to that final statement Williams made a revealing statement: “The saddest people always try their hardest to make people happy because they know what it’s like to feel absolutely worthless and they don’t want anyone else to feel like that” (Williams, nd.). Perhaps his humor, as a defense mechanism, was an attempt to deal with the deeper issue of feeling worthless, but he knew not how to address. This writer suspects, in the words of Thoreau, that “most people live quiet lives of desperation” rooted in regret and self-loathing.

A Ubiquitous Experience

“Oh, I will think of things gone long ago, And I weave them to a song...” Euripides

Regret is a ubiquitous experience in the human psyche. Our brain-mind has the ability of imagination to visit the past (as well as the future), and with such cogitations realize how one has

“fallen so short” (Rom. 3:23). Regret is both acute and chronic. Pink (2022) cites one Swedish study which found people regretting 30% percent of their decisions the previous week (p. 24). Many writers pondering their journey of life have expressed a plethora of regrets (e.g., Maugham, 1938/1988; Arterburn, 2009; Becker, 1973; Bittner, 1992; Murray, 1982; Palau, 2012; Jung, 1963, see pp. 29, 320, 358). Augustine was quite poignant in his *Confessions* with his effusions about his life in the world and sin (Schaff, 1886/1987). (I don’t think this writer has ever had a relationship with a counselee who has not expressed at some point tremendous regret in a session.). James Baldwin is quoted as saying (Pink, 2022, np), “Though we would like to live without regrets, and sometimes proudly insist that we have none, this is not really possible, if only because we are mortal.” The idea of “no regrets” (tattooed on many a person’s body) is essentially denial of an existential reality, and perhaps an arrogant way of representing his life.

Throughout biblical history man has recognized his fallen nature and bemoaned this in statements of regret. Over the development of things in Saul’s life, he experienced great “torment” (1 Sam. 16:13-23). Could it be that regret was part of his psychospiritual agony? David expressed deep feelings of remorse, regret throughout his journey of life (Ps. 25:7; 32:1-5; 51:1ff). Solomon expressed a hatred for life (Ecc. 2:17-18). Job expressed strong words of despising himself (Job 42:6). The Apostle Paul perpetually felt regret for his fanaticism and subsequent mistreated God’s people (1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:12-16). Peter “wept bitterly” over his denial of Christ (Mt. 26:69-74), and, as if a road diverged for these two disciples, Judas felt regret, but moved beyond it, to the dark side of regret, and he embraced the psychological sibling, self-loathing, and from that egregious psychological point, committed suicide (Mt. 27:3-5).

(It is quite the speculative thought, but perhaps in eastern ancient man's existential speculation, the idea of reincarnation emerged from the feelings of regret—maybe I could go back in this life with another shot at it. This however is quite different from the biblical perspective or western thought that reveals we only have this life to live and then comes a reckoning of our life before God. See Hebrews 9:27.)

Sources of Regret

The origin of regret is rooted in many possible sources, all of which seem to contribute to this emotional challenge. We will explore many of these sources, which are inextricably linked to a theological-psychospiritual etiology.

Created in the Image of God/Imago Dei

Human beings were created in the Garden of Eden to live perfect in the image of God (*imago Dei*) (Gen. 1:26-28; 5:1; 9:5-6; Mt. 5:48; Ac. 17:28; 1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:23-24; Col. 3:10; Jam. 3:9). This “concept is critical because the image of God is what makes humans human” (Erickson, 2013, p. 459). Yet this perfect existence and lifestyle was disrupted by sin, which altered the psychological well-being of individuals (Bloomfield, 2017; Menninger, 1978). This experience of sin brought on tremendous guilt and shame (Gen. 3:7-11), and along with it, death (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12-21). “We are not simply sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners” (Erickson, 2013, p. 528). And because we sin, every human being will have regrets—“regrets make us human” (Pink, 2022, p. 160).

Human beings started living in ways that were contrary to what they created for and this brought tremendous cognitive dissonance, but more precisely the experience of regret, and the potential of self-loathing in the human psyche. As beings made in the image of God, there is a

socio-psychospiritual effect that is deleterious when human beings step out of the intended purpose of their existence. Human beings are highly attuned moral and spiritual creatures, and any deviation from that theological grounding instigates trouble within the psyche of a person (e.g., guilt, shame, anxiety).

This deviation comes primarily through sin, and the biblical idea asserts that “sin is a very serious matter with far-reaching and long-lasting consequences” (Erickson, 2013, p. 549). Perhaps one of the major reasons for regret is that sin creates a “disunity in the individual”—a discrepancy within one’s own character (Erickson, 2013, p. 523). The terms are interesting. The word, iniquity (‘*awal*, Hebrew) indicates this “lack of integrity” (Ibid). The Hebrew word, *resha*’ usually translated wickedness carries with it the idea of emotional agitation and thus “tossing and restlessness” (Erickson, 2013, p. 526). The word, ‘*aven* in the Hebrew means “trouble”—the consequences of “misery, trouble, difficulty, and sorrow” (Ibid, p. 528). So, it seems, inherit in sin is the concomitant experience of regret. One cannot so easily sin, without feeling regret, unless one develops a “seared conscious” (1 Tim. 4:2) or goes on to so brutalize their delicate moral apparatus, and they become numb to their own behavior. (This would also be the case with those *fully ensconced* in narcissistic personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder, and histrionic personality disorder.)

Inextricable Link with God’s Holiness

In our inextricable existence *in a holy God*, in whom “we live and move and have our being” (New International Version, 2011, Acts 17:28), there is an innate sense of the holy within the human consciousness or psyche (Rom. 2:14-16; cf. Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:14-16). We are to “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48) and to “be imitators of God, as beloved children” (New American Standard Bible, 1995, Ephesian 5:1). Referring to Calvin’s

position on the image of God, Erickson (2013) states, “we come to know ourselves by measuring ourselves against His holiness” (p. 463). We see this in Isaiah’s experience in an encounter with God (Isa. 6:1ff), in which he cried out, “ ‘Woe to me!...I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...’ ” (New International Version, 2011, Isaiah 6:5). This holiness is so fundamental that without it “no one will see the Lord” (New International Version, 2011, Hebrews 12:14). Being *unholy* instigates feelings of regret because in Him we have an innate sense of the holy.

Ascending the Mountain of Life

It seems axiomatic to this writer that with greater age comes greater regret—the higher one gets up the mountain of life, the more one is able to objectively reflect and ponder the personal journey one has taken. This is especially true, as the faith of a person grows, the awareness grows of how off the mark one has been (through sin and foolishness); and as one realizes the grandeur of God’s holiness, the realization of one’s own un-holiness becomes painfully evident. The holy light of God’s existence breaks evermore upon the unholiness of one’s journey of life, like the sun beaming upon the face of the earth. This faith one grows in—gaining altitude up the mountain of life, provides clearer perspectives on how one has expedited life: the good, the bad, and the ugly. “Two decades of research on counterfactual thinking exposes an oddity: thoughts about the past that make us feel better are relatively rare, while thoughts that make us feel worse are exceedingly common” (Pink, 2022, p. 38). Why would that not be, if we were not made for a higher order, a greater effectiveness, and an impeccable life? So, we are able to discern with the painful reality of regret our bad moves up this up the mountain of life.

Cognitive Dissonance

Given the delicacy of the human psyche, people become psychologically wrecked by their sinful, unholy, misguided, and foolish behavior. A psychic disunity or cognitive dissonance emerges in an individual, which hurls one into a pathetic emotional state—an emotionally shattered individual. Regret can become a serious neurosis, a symptomatic indicator that something has gone wrong on a soul level. Even if the person looks fine on the outside, an unpleasant psychological subterfuge exists. Human beings were created to have a unified psyche—“unified beings” (Erickson, 2013, p. 436) rooted in a peaceful, loving and joyous connection with God.

Blocher (1994) discussion about evil is unprecedented. He points out that there seems to be an innate resounding “no” to any behavior that is evil (e.g., Jacqueline Kennedy crying out “no” at the moment her husband was shot). Evil is unacceptable in the human psyche. A human being was created to be a perfect creature, pristine in the sense of being holy, as God is holy (Mt. 5:48; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). We are deeply averse to any kind of sin and evil and indulgence in it as a victim or wrong-doer has emotional consequences.

Comparison

As one professor put it, “Comparison is the death of joy.” It was the first cognitive move that jump started creation’s dance with sin/evil: Satan evidently had to of compared himself to God (Rev. 12:7-9); Cain compared himself to Able (Gen. 4:1-8); village compared itself to village and attacked for many nefarious reasons (e.g., greed). This is perhaps is why God commands us not to covet (Ex. 20:17; Dt. 5:21; Rom. 7:7-8; 13:9-10)—it is rooted in a comparison. The Scripture forbids comparison—it is the bane of humanity (2 Cor. 10:12; Gal. 5:26; 6:4-5; cf. Ecc. 7:14). As Pink (2022, p. 22) puts it, “Comparison lives at regret’s core.”

One compares what I might have been, what I could of done, or in comparison to what others have done.

Defining Terms

We all have disappointments. These are usually caused by outside factors. Regrets on the other hand are things that we do that are our fault. It is important to delineate between these two. They must not be conflated.

Regret

Regret is defined as “sorrow aroused by circumstances beyond one’s control or power to repair” and “an expression of distressing emotion (as sorrow or disappointment) (Mish, 2004, p.1048). It is rooted in the French word, *regret*, *regrater*, “long after, bewail.” It goes back to the 1590s as “pain or distress in the mind due to some external circumstance” but in the 1640s took on the meaning of “pain or distress in the mind at something done or left undone” (Etymoline.com).

The Greek word for regret is *metamelomai*, which involves the idea of repentance (2 Cor. 7:8). To not feel regret or not repent is *ametameletos*. When one is feeling this sorrow from sin or inappropriate behavior, the emotion should lead a person to an appropriate response—repentance, and thus a change of mind. But the sorrow that doesn’t lead to a change of thinking and behavior, is *ametameletos*. This kind of sorrow over sin would just be about sorrow, not about growth. Yet the word *regret* implies a shifting to a change within the person. In other words, the regret would have the effect of moving a person to adjust, which would then allow the person to find psychological relief and move one to better directions with his life (Pink, 2022, pp. 159-165). The idea of repentance is prominent in the Bible, but is strangely lacking in regret

research. “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves...” (New International Version, 2011, 2 Corinthians 7:11). Sorrow over one’s sins is prominent in the Bible. The word/verb, bewail is *klaio*, is also translated weep. It is utilized in the middle voice of “beating oneself, beating the breast, as a token of grief” (Vine, Unger & White, 1984, p. 65). This unfolds the depth of one’s regret over sinful or foolish behavior.

Self-loathing and Self-Reproach

Self-loathing or self-reproach is “regret on steroids.” *Self-loathing* involves a far more significant emotional intensity that often leads to tragic outcomes. It is essentially a “self-hatred” and “a loathing of oneself” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). *Self-reproach* carries with it the idea of “harsh criticism or disapproval of oneself especially for wrong doing” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Self-loathing then is an internal sense of shame causes one to hate oneself, and self-reproach is the internal and external dialogue expressing such self-hatred.

Regret and Self-loathing Delineated

This writer has been moved by the research to more sharply delineate the experiences of regret and self-loathing. Regret is ubiquitous or universal; self-loathing is a possibility. It is a nefarious level in the human psyche that is possible if one drives her life into the proverbial ditch. We see this delineation in the contrasting experience of Peter and Judas, as will be discussed shortly.

Brown and Bosson (2001) present interesting research on the idea of how the narcissist, while being caught up in self-love, has the concomitant experience of self-loathing dancing around in his psyche. This research offers interesting perspectives depicting the despair many

are in, no matter how they attempt to cover it up. Pride as feature narcissism is an indicator of a spiritual problem that a person has; the only hope is the spiritual remedy of repentance (change of mind) for any hope of wholeness to take place in a narcissist's life. The connection between self-loathing and narcissism is a unique perspective, but it stands to reason based on an insecurity, which is the basis for most narcissists. Pride emerges as a coverup to hide the insecurity, which eventually drives the individual to the point of self-loathing.

Fromm's idea of necrophilia—the love of death, which is essentially demonic (Jn. 10:10) (vs. biophilia—the love of life) has a connection to self-loathing (Fromm, 1964, pp. 37-61). The fascination with death (e.g., abortion, suicide, murder novels and tv series, homosexuality—the logical *extinction* of humanity, transgenderism) eventually leads to a hatred of life and then a hatred of self. It is interesting that self-loathing is posited by eastern religions as that of being prideful, a misguided internal dialogue/self-construction, and a self-talk that is egocentrism (Heim, 2009). It is the unhealthy use of the defense/escape mechanism of self-observation.

From a biblical perspective, we are to love others as we love ourselves (Lev. 19:17-18; Mt. 22:37-40; Mk. 12:30-31; Gal. 5:14). How can self-loathing be acceptable if one is living in a vibrant relationship with God, filled with the Spirit (Rom. 8:9-17; Gal. 5:16, 22-23; Eph. 5:18), and experiencing the abundant life (Jn. 10:10)? They are antithetical. Self-loathing then is outside of the will of God. We see this then in Elijah's experience of self-loathing after the episode of Mount Carmel (1 Kgs. 18:45; 19:1-18). God asks him, "What are you doing here?" (vs. 13). Essentially, God told him to get up and get on with his life. This can only happen when an individual is under the influence of God and has a purpose with his life. Otherwise, one lingers and is immobilized in self-pity.

Regret and self-loathing are contrasted vividly in the experiences of Peter and Judas with respect to the regret they felt in sinning against Jesus. How they handled this regret was a matter of life and death. As Nouwen (1994) observes the predicament:

“Both were lost children. Judas, no longer able to hold on to the truth that he remained God’s child hung himself...Peter, in the midst of his despair, claimed it and returned with many tears. Judas chose death. Peter chose life. I realize that this choice is always before me. Constantly I am tempted to wallow in my own lostness and lose touch with my original goodness, my God-given humanity, my basic blessedness, and thus allow the power of death to take charge. This happens over and over again whenever I say to myself: ‘I am no good. I am useless. I am worthless. I am unlovable. I am a nobody. There are always countless events and situations that I can single out to convince myself and others that my life is just not worth living, that I am only a burden, a problem, a source of conflict, or an exploiter of other people’s time and energy. Many people live with this dark, inner sense of themselves...they let darkness absorb them so completely that there is not light left to turn toward and return to...spiritually they are no longer alive” (pp. 50-51).

Regret can lead to self-loathing, if it is not handled properly and dealt with in an effective manner. Later in this paper we will provide approaches in handling regret, but now let’s break the various categories and frequency of these feelings of regret.

Categories and Frequency of Feelings of Regret

There are many different categories of regret. The prominent work of Pink (2022, pp. 61-71) pulls data from a wide range of research starting in 1949 by George Gallup’s American

Institute of Public Opinion, other regret researchers, and from his own quantitative and qualitative research. He found that the greatest regrets tended to shift over the decades. In this current era of history in the USA and around the world, he found the common regrets were: family, partners, education, career, finances, other, health, and friends. He discovered what he calls “deep structure of regret” emerging like roots into four categories: *foundation regrets*—those things foundation to our fundamental existence, which are difficult to undo (e.g., health, education, finances—blow it in these categories and long-term consequences are often irreversible) (pp. 83-96); *boldness regrets* (e.g., not speaking up, lack of temerity, inactions, failures to act/“regrettable inactions,” settling, failure to explore life in different ways) (pp. 99-111); *moral regrets* (e.g., not doing the right thing, doing harm, cheating, disloyalty, rebuffing authority, desecration of sacred things—abortion being the most significant), which surprisingly to this writer, he found lowest in number but highest in the pain factor (pp.113-129); and *connection regrets* (e.g., the continuing, repairing or development of a relationship) (pp. 131-46). All of these foundation regrets are rooted in a need we have as a human being (e.g., the needs to be good, have stability, pursue opportunity, be loved).

Regarding the frequency of these feelings of regret, the American Regret Project involving 4,489 participants found the following breakdown regarding the question, How often do you look back on your life and wish you had done things differently? (i.e., regret): 1 percent said they never engage in such behavior, 17 percent do it rarely, 43 percent do it frequently, 21 percent do it all the time. A “whopping” eighty-two percent have feelings of regret a significant amount of time (Pink, 2022, pp. 23-24). If regret was a virus, it would be declared a pandemic. Now let’s look at different types.

Regret and Not Doing

Non-doing is an aspect of regret or the fear of missing out (FOMO) (Metz, 2019). “People regret inactions more than actions” (Pink, 2022, p. 151). “Opportunity and obligation sit at the center of regret,” but opportunity is the real “driver of regret” and this becomes especially so as people age (Pink, 2022, p. 152-55). An example of inaction is the statesman, Henry Clay (1777-1852), who regretted his whole life having never learned Latin and Greek (Johnson, 1997, p. 321). This inaction type of regret is one of the most significant categories. Pink (2022, pp. 35-39) puts this in the category of “what if.”

However, for some people, regret for non-doing is “ill-fitting.” It relates to the capacity of the individual to in fact accomplish what they failed to do. The abilities of an individual are “relevant to such regret.” There is often a neurotic guilt one feels for something that was never achievable. Neurotic guilt can lead to regret and furthermore to self-loathing. Therefore, it must be delineated whether the regret is warranted, for in some cases the experience that cultivated the emotional disturbance is rooted more so in neurotic guilt anything else (Mertz, 2019). It must be recognized that neurotic ruminating is a waste of emotional energy—nothing is gained by it (Mt. 6:25-33). So, the issue of what is fitting or ill-fitting is a variable with regret. If one had the ability and wherewithal to accomplish or do something, but didn’t do it, there were higher the feelings of regret (Pink, 2022, p. 37).

The idea of regret and non-doing is given biblical attention implicit in the prophet Samuel’s solicitous statement: “As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you” (New International Version, 2011, 1 Samuel 12:23). There seems to be an implicit sorrow that David exhibited by *not* disciplining his sons and addressing their sinful behavior (1 Kgs. 1:6), perhaps in light of his own moral failures. His lamenting over his son,

Absalom, perhaps reveals a deep sense of regret in missed opportunities as a father (2 Sam. 18:19-19:8).

Morality vs. Immorality

Deep within our ego—our soul/psyche, consciousness, and DNA is a moral code that God put into our being (Ps. 40:8; Rom. 2:12-16). It is like the sensors that go off and appear on our dashboard when things are malfunctioning under the hood. Ignore those signals and the car will have a serious breakdown. The same is true with our functioning as a human being. God wants us to avoid breaking down.

Morality counts. Not so with the nihilist, Friedrich Nietzsche (n.d.) who saw morality as a “fetter, as a drug” in this “comedy of our existence. Out of his own rebellion, he “was caught in a bear-trap of his own making,” as Chesterton observed somewhere in his prodigious writings. His life brought about its own kind of mental and relational agony, and those who followed his philosophy ended up in the most miserable of existences (e.g., Hitler, G. Gordan Liddy until he became a Christian). For Nietzsche (1901/1968), life was about power—might makes right. Getting and maintaining power was the point of the human existence based on a Darwinian model. One has to ask how that turns out for the millions who have embraced such demonic notions. Ultimately, one has to decide if living morally is right and ask the question of why this may be so. For the Christian, it is rooted in the reality of a moral code given by a Creator for the good, and even maximizing of the human experience.

Morality is rooted in *almost* everything we do. Our behaviors for the most part are either right or wrong, or wise or foolish. (An exception would be something like dropping the pass to score a touchdown to win the football game.). Break the moral code within our own conscious, and the regret can be significant. One remembers the words of Lady Macbeth rubbing her hands

in utter despair: “What, will these hands ne’er be clean?” We are moral beings and we cannot escape the weight of this reality. (The only exception is the sociopath who has step over into evil.). Generally, live well and regrets are limited. Both biblical theology and regret research bear this out.

Psychological research points to the idea of morality as a necessary variable for happiness and thus attenuating regret (Bloomfield, 2017; Bauer et al, 1992). This may be considered the proactive side of the topic which hinders regret. Immoral living leads to regret and mental illness as indicated by Menninger (1978). Psychological relief can be found in repentance and a commitment to live a good life (Ac. 3:19). Morality is a hedge against regret, and there is abundant biblical affirmation encouraging the avoidance of sin, which leads to misery and subsequent regret (Ps. 1:4-5; Pr. 2:16-19, 20-22; 7:26-27; Mal. 3:18; 2 Tim. 3:13). If one “sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature he will reap destruction” (New International Version, 2011, Galatians 6:8) and one can logically deduce that destruction is regretful. “Groaning,” which implies regret, over moral failure is seen throughout the biblical canon (Gen. 4:13-14; Pr. 5:11; Ezk. 24:23; Mt. 26:75; 27:3-4).

Moral philosophy is germane to understanding the experience of regret. It involves the issue of happiness, and happiness is rooted in how one behaves as a human being. The good life is the moral life. The only exception to this would be the sociopath who can be happy and yet live an evil life (e.g., Stalin), and apparently have no regrets. The issue of how morality is integrated into the idea of happiness has been a discussion that goes back to the ancient philosophers (e.g., Plato). Conversely, living immorally contributes to self-regret.

Bauer et al (1992) utilizes a “phenomenological study” through in-depth interviews. Their qualitative research utilizes a “dialogal” method, which has been an approach in regret research. They point out many previous studies on regret that have utilized this method. Metz (2019) also utilizes a qualitative approach in doing his research and introduces such terminology as agency (e.g., agentially-loaded regret), fitting and ill-fitting regret, and “ability-based” regret. These terms involve an objective analysis of a person with respect to the item of regret. The author cites many others who have delved into these realms of regret research. Bloomfield (2017) utilizes moral philosophy and a series of syllogisms to make his arguments for morality as key for happiness, and ultimately a hedge against regret. Much research has been done on moral philosophy going back to the ancients, and this foundation is crucial in unpacking the source of regret.

Inman (2007) utilizes quantitative research in measuring people’s expectations and purchases (regret on consumer spending), but refers to meta-analysis of life regrets involving such things as poor financial decisions, “deleterious consumption” (e.g., smoking, gambling), obesity (e.g., over-consumption), and materialism through “excessive consumption.” This kind of approach is utilized in consumer psychology.

In life there are tradeoffs and one has to come to realize if they are to mitigate the negative emotion of regret and the possibility of self-loathing, they must choose the path of righteousness. As someone put it: The price of unprincipled action ultimately will be more costly than the price of integrity.”

Sinful/Evil Thoughts

Pink (2022) does not categorize sinful or evil thoughts as a significant delineated item. From a Judeo-Christian theological perspective, the interior thought-life (in the mind and the

heart) are of a serious nature and can carry significance (Gen. 6:5; 1 Chron. 28:9; Ps. 10:4; 13:2; 55:2; 139:23; Pr. 15:26; Isa. 55:7; 59:7; Jer. 4:14; Mt. 9:4; 12:25; 15:19; Lk. 1:51; Rom. 2:15; Eph. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; Col. 3:2; Heb. 3:1; 4:12; Jam. 2:4). “For as he thinks within himself, so he is” (New American Standard Bible, 1995, Proverbs 23:7). Jesus sees the heart as the origin of sin and evil (Mt. 15:19-20; MK. 7:21-23), and individuals are accountable for their thoughts (Phil. 4:8). When a disciple of Jesus is so caught up in a holy life, they become very sensitive to the very thoughts they have. This is especially true for the one walking with God: he is alarmed by any thought that may be sinful or evil. Fleeting thoughts of sin and evil come with the knowledge of good and evil and living East of Eden (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:22). Some thoughts can come from a demonic assault (1 Tim. 4:1), or they come from within the brain or psyche/soul of the individual (Jam. 1:13-15). Whatever the source, sinful or evil thoughts must be taken captive “to make it obedience to Christ” (New International Version, 2011, 2 Corinthians 10:5). Otherwise, regret will emerge from even having entertained those malevolent thoughts.

Sexual Sin

Regrets are especially poignant in the Bible with those who commit sexual sin (Pr. 5:11-14; 6:27-29, 32-33). This is true because of the intimate nature of sexual sin. One senses they are stepping onto holy ground, and the violation of it is unsettling. David’s sin with Bathsheba eventually created tremendous regret (Ps. 32:1-5; 51:3-12). That is perhaps why so many have to drink up a bit before making a move in this direction or to numb oneself after the sinful experience. This writer has found sexual sin one of the greatest regrets reported in counseling sessions.

Wasting of Time

As one ascends the mountain of life and gains altitude, one is able to see the directions that were taken on the journey, and how much time was utilized pursuing a particular direction, spent with certain people, and making effort with various endeavors. The closer one gets to the summit, the greater the view on the contour of one's journey. Time becomes the important factor as one ages. As one aphorism puts it: "Time is all we have and don't." This is perhaps one of the greatest regrets—the loss of time.

Expectations and Loss Opportunity

A person can have great expectations with life, especially true with the Baby Boom generation (Jones, 1980), but if these expectations are not realized, regret can be significant. Often, many traffic in the defense mechanism of autistic fantasy to feel significant as a human being. This involves an elaborate but fanciful plan that fails to materialize. The person then, "splits" and goes into phase of disillusionment, in which they feel angry, sad, and/or even withdrawn. Regret emerges because one's dreams have not been fulfilled. There is a sobering aphorism to consider: "Opportunity has a shelf life." If one misses out on opportunities, realistic or unrealistic, regret emerges. This fits the research of Pink (2022) on regret over the "if only" (pp. 29-39).

Relationships

We are relational beings and we expect things will go well in human connectivity. It is innate in us, and when a relationship does not work well there are varying degrees of disappointment. Because our Creator-God is love (1 Jn. 4:8), He made human beings for love (1 Jn. 4:8-16), and for the relationship to not be perfectly aligned with love can be devastating. Great regrets emerge out of a love gone badly. Love blesses us the most and wrecks us the most.

There is a valid observation made in the movie, *Beautiful Mind*, as the professor at Princeton University, Dr. Nash, was receiving the Nobel Prize in mathematics. His speech (in the movie) could be summarized in these points: love is the center of what is rational, and the further we get away from love, the further we get away from what is rational; and what is irrational becomes destructive to a human being. To be unloving is as counter-human as anything in life. This writer has counseled many people who have had enormous regrets with respect to a lost love.

Psychospiritual Solutions and Therapeutic Approaches

There resides within a human being the yearning for psychological relief. (That is primarily why defense mechanism are primarily utilized.) Blocher (1994) makes an interesting observation:

“The human mind is so constituted that it can no longer remain at rest once the question has been implanted in it. Tirelessly it formulates proposals for an answer, even if that entails submerging the problem, in the absence of a solution, beneath obscure, subtle phraseology in order to mask its failure, as a cuttlefish covers its flight. It is even ready to produce solutions that merely paper over cracks, so gaining an illusory peace for a limited time” (p. 13).

Billy Joel, the famed singer put it somewhere: “We have enough hip; we have enough cool. What we need is substance.” Substantive answers are available from a theological perspective, and all other answers tend to lend support to the theological perspective. The following perspectives and interventions are offered.

Live in the Reality that you are a Creature Made in God's Image

Individuals must viscerally identify with the stunning theological reality of their existence, the most prominent of which is that each person is made in the image of God. As Erickson (2013, p. 425) put it, "What humans are understood to be, will color our perception, of what [is] needed to be done for them, how it was done, and their ultimate destiny" (p. 425). Identifying with the image of God (*imago Dei*) involves living according to the dignity of what one was intended for (Kilner, 2015). Regret is swallowed up in this theological reality to live out.

False anthropologies ultimately lead an individual into a lifestyle that hurts his well-being (e.g., "man as machine," animal, sexual being, economic tool, "pawn in the universe," man is good a part from God) (Erickson, 2013, pp. 429-33). As Erickson puts it, none of these false anthropologies "fully satisfy as a view by which to live" (Erickson, 2013, p. 436). They fall short and lead to more and more regret on the journey of life. One must be sanctified in the theological reality of one's existence (Jn. 17:17).

The idea of a human being as made in God's image, gives the individual dignity to not traffic in a lifestyle that is self-destructive. It is high theology with a high calling. If one doesn't understand this high calling, what is to prevent one from defaulting to low living, and the subsequent and perpetual psychological tradeoff of regret and self-loathing? Jonathan Edwards' perspective is a delightful consideration: God "radiated his goodness and beauty into the souls of men and women so that they became part of him.... 'a kind of participation in God' in which 'God puts his own beauty...his beautiful likeness, upon their souls' and [that this reality would be] the greatest of earthy pleasures as well as a spiritual transformation" (Johnson, 1997, p. 111). This is an inviting appeal to the tortured soul of humanity.

Repentance—Getting on the Right Path

When one is off course and experiences the trouble that comes with being on the wrong path, there is only one good option: return back to the original course. Jesus emphasized this in saying that He was the “way” (Jn. 14:6), carrying with it (in the Jewish mind) the idea of the path or highway that people must journey on (Dt. 5:32-33; Ps. 27:11; Isa. 30:21; 35:8). It is therapeutic to be on a path that is good, instead of staying on a path that build further regret. This is where repentance comes into play for it puts a person on a new path that is of benefit emotionally/psychologically, socially, and spiritually.

Gain From the Past

Someone made a helpful observation with respect to regret psychology: “Never be a prisoner of your past. It was just a lesson, not a life sentence.” A Cherokee aphorism that was often used by Will Rogers states, “Don’t let yesterday use up too much of today.” From a Christian perspective, regret with its deeper level of contemplation, provides an individual with an opportunity to learn (Inman, 2007). This is a proactive approach that has Scriptural support through the idea that one learns from past sins and moral failures (Job 36:15; Ps. 119:67, 71; Pr. 16:6, 17; Isa. 38:15-17; 48:10; Dan. 4:25-26; 1 Cor. 5:15; 1 Th. 4:3; 5:22; Heb. 12:10-11; Jam. 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 4:12-13).

In spite of one’s failures, mistakes and sins, God can utilize those experiences to deepen and work through the individual (Isa. 38:17; 48:10; 61:3; Job 36:15; Isa. 38:15; Hos. 5:15; Dan. 4:25-26; Jam. 1:2-4; Heb. 12:10-11; 1Pet. 4:12-13), and “fulfill the Maker’s intention” (Erickson, 2013, 436). As Saul Bellow (Bloom, 1987, p. 16) put it, “In the greatest confusion there is still an open channel to the soul.”

God can use the past to bless others. Charles H. Spurgeon's sermon, "The Years the Locust Has Eaten" based on Joel 2:25 is convicting, "I will repay you for the years the locust have eaten" (New International Version, 2011, Joel 2:25). Those who have suffered by their own foolishness can have a profound affect upon others—God can use the years the locust has eaten. As Ed Young has emphasized, "your mess can become your ministry; your misery can become your message."

The cross is our template—the greatest evil became the greatest good. The greatest failures in a person's life can morph into the greatest good, but only if the individual is open to how God can use the bad experience to be used in a good way to bless others, and this primarily comes, if you will, in expediting a ministry.

There is an irrepressible perspective on life that is encouraged for God's people. It is an irrepressible theological optimism: in spite of detours, God always "leads us in triumph in Christ Jesus" (New International Version, 2011, 2 Corinthians 2:14); and "all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose" (New International Version, 2011, Romans 8:28). With all of the experience and wisdom gained from the mistakes, failures, sins, foolishness, faux pas, peccadilloes, coalescing in the present era, one could authentically declare, "This will prove to be the greatest era yet on my journey of life."

Yielding to the Holy Spirit Over the Flesh

The Apostle Paul presents one of the greatest theological treatises in the Bible. In Romans 7:7-25 and 8:1-39, there is a wrestling that takes place with anyone who becomes a disciple of Jesus. One aspect of life's struggles is that with self (within one's own psych). This passage surfaces much about the human predicament: the realization of one's unspiritual nature and enslavement to sin (7:14, 20); the cognitive dissonance within an individual cultivated by sin

(7:15-20, 25); the recognition of the power of sin to overtake a human being, which leads to emotional misery (7:24). It then provides the answer to the human predicament initiated by sin: the psychospiritual relief that comes in Christ (7:25; 8:1-4); the Spirit working in a human being which brings about a psycho-spiritual health—“life and peace” (8:5-11); the cultivation of a healthy identity as a child of God (8:14-16); the power of the Spirit to sanctify an individual and put an end to lifestyle that perpetuate emotional trauma (8:12-13); a future beyond this world (8:17-25); embracing the destiny of being “predestined to be conformed into the image of his Son” (8:29); and having a life rooted in the love of God—the greatest security a human being could ever have with respect to the troubles of this life (8:31-39).

Confession and Psychological Relief

The Greek word for confession is *homolegeo*, which literally means to “say the same” (*homo*, same; *lego*, I say). It is essential to agree with God about one’s behavior. To agree with God (confession) is to be on the right side; to not agree with God puts a person at odds with the Creator. This alienates a person from the Creator, which causes an emotional disconnect that a person was not intended to experience. Finding forgiveness through confession appears to bring relief to the sinner; concealing it has the opposite effect (Proverbs 28:13). Isaiah’s encounter with God led him to realize his sinfulness, which then led him to regret, and confession (Isaiah 6:1-6). Jeremiah felt great emotional distress over his sins—“See, Lord, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart, I am disturbed, for I have been rebellious” (New International Version, 2011, Lamentations 1:20). Whatever that “rebellion” was, it brought him great psychological discomfort. Perhaps he felt regret for not having done more to keep Israel from falling into God’s judgment along with his distress of being under the Babylonian siege. We see this in general with Israel in the experience of God’s judgment. The result was a guilt

over their sins that was “weighing” them down and a sense that they were “wasting away” (New International Version, 2011, Ezekiel 33:10-11). Pink calls this kind of approach “self-disclosure” (pp. 168-172). Rather than denying, one finds relief in being vulnerable (Brown, 2012, 2015, 2018). Both Brown and Pink demonstrate how such an action can bring about tremendous emotional relief from a regret.

Self-distancing

Pink (2022, pp. 177-182) advocates an approach called self-distancing. This is achieved through space, time and language—what you say to yourself. Projecting yourself beyond the regret to a future you will or could. This is also an approach Frankl (2006) advocates with his logotherapy, as found in the “Postscript” of *Man’s Search for Meaning* (pp.137-154). This writer thinks in terms of the “best me” emerging ten years from now and what it would take to realize being that person in very specific categories (e.g., health, spirituality, relationships, achievement).

Community

Community is a major path to healing for the regrets of life. Psychospiritual healing and learning comes best in community. Context is significant in human development, which speaks of “the ecology of human development” and “ecological assets” (Lerner, 2018, p. 293, 299). The church is a healing community of acceptance (1 Cor. 6:11). “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (New International Version, 2011, Ephesians 2:13). It is community where an individual is accepted with all of their regrets (Rom. 15:7). The numerous “one another” passages in the New Testament that speak cogently and comprehensively to the reality of an edifying dynamic that exists in the church.

As a social being, how one lives matters, especially in relationship to others. The way a person treats others has a psychological effect (Pr. 11:25; Ac. 20:35). The dynamic between people must be considered, especially in light to the “golden rule” (Mt. 7:12) and the mandate to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; Mt. 12:30-31).

It is agreed that the act of forgiveness can spare a person the “hell of self-loathing.” Being forgiven has an effect on the wrongdoer, and actually aids in the healing of the emotional pain of regret—when one is forgiven, it aids the person in self-compassion and moving on with his life.

Build New Cognitive Constructs in the Brain

If a person is to overcome the emotional stress of self-regret, self-loathing and self-reproach, there must be a change of thinking and the building of a whole new way of thinking about one’s past, present and future. This is a cognitive behavioral approach that has support from neuroscience (Siegal, 2012; Beck, 1979).

There must be a balanced theological perspective on regret that is built in the brain that serves you as a person. Indeed, “framing regret as an opportunity rather than a threat helps us transform it—so it operates as a sharp stick rather than a leaden blanket” (Pink, 2022, p. 54).

Integrating theological perspective into one’s thinking is of great benefit on a practical level. This must involve the use of neural linguistics and such techniques as “stop-think” and “alternative thinking”. The mind-brain dichotomy is germane here. There is a difference between mind and brain (Siegel, 2012), and it is the mind (transcendent/spiritual self) that builds the brain (organic self). This can happen intentionally in dealing the issues of the past. The mind (the transcendent self) must tell the brain (organic self) during moments of regret or self-loathing theological truth that it must perpetually embrace. This is how one is actually

“transformed” by the “renewing of one’s mind” (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:23). It is a practical approach for individuals to experience psychospiritual relief. Brain plasticity allows for the building of new cognitive constructs/schemas and eventually “neural clusters” of thought (Siegel, 2012, pp. 16-17; Thompson, 2010; Doidge, 2007; Amen, 2005) that would be of crucial benefit in living a guilt-free and joyous life. It is noteworthy to mention that neuroscience supports what the church has advocated for two millennium regarding the growth/change/transformation of a human being. If a person is to overcome the emotional stress of self-regret, self-loathing and self-reproach, there must be a change of thinking and the building of a whole new way of thinking about one’s past, present and future. This is a cognitive behavioral approach that is very much in harmony with the Bible (Beck, 1979).

Forgetting What Lies Behind

The Apostle Paul had many things to regret, and he mentions these in several passages (Acts 26:9-11; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13, 15). He also mentions his accomplishments and heritage (Phil. 3:4-6), but he offers a challenging example: “But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make it clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (New International Version, 2011, Philippians 3:13-16). The idea is not that he doesn’t remember the past but that “his mind is not fixed on them any longer” (Muller, 1974, p. 124), and he strains forward with all his might like a runner fixed on the goal (Ibid). The primary view is to future things that will emerge along the way, but especially anticipating an eternal glory. It is akin to looking in the front window of your car

while driving to a destination, versus staring in the rearview mirror, which could hinder the forward progress.

Focus on “At Least”

Pink (2022, pp. 37-39, 164-65, 205) has an effective cognitive approach with regret: focus on “at least.” At least I did this and did not do that. This minimizes the sting of regret and “works like antibiotics...to fortify our psychological immune system and fight off certain harmful emotions” (p. 165). This is a neural linguistic approach that can be instrumental in mitigating the sting of self-regret. Neural linguistic approaches such this one are effective in regulating one’s emotions with respect to remembering past mistakes.

Gratitude on How the Regret Experience Altered You

This approach is a wisdom rooted in the aphorism goes: “When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.” The focus on how the regret altered you in some way for good is perhaps the most important redemptive outlook to have. Did the regret cause you to stop a behavior, make a shift in a direction you were going, deepen you as a person, think in different ways, make you appreciate certain things in life to a greater degree, improve your decision making (Pink, 2022, 42-45), improve performance and revise strategies of approach (Pink, 2022, pp. 45-48). The result out of this approach with regret is that it will drive you to become a better person.

Undoing

Undoing is the act of repairing the acts of undoing by being proactive in the time that one has with left with life. For instance, forgiveness from the one who has *been wronged* can aid in the mitigation of regret by the offender (Novitz, 1998), but the offender (filled with regret) must be proactive in seeking the forgiveness of another. Pink (2022, pp. 159-65) goes into detail about this approach (e.g., make amends, change the situation, embark upon opportunities), which

fits the thesis of his book—seeing the positive side of regret, as an instrument for growth. Rather than wallow in self-pity, which is what many do, there is opportunity to correct, but it must be realized as someone observed, “Opportunity has a shelf life.” As many have advocate: “live until they die; don’t die before you die.” Attempting to “undo” is a proactive approach with life that will shift a person’s life in a positive direction.

Jesus: The Only Hope for Emotional Distress

Perhaps dealing with regret over past moral failures is a *journey* to a *deep acceptance* of the grace of God at the foot of the cross. The ultimate the answer is found in forgiveness through Christ and living in the grace of God (1 Cor, 6:11; Eph. 2:8-10), and forgiveness can keep an individual from slipping from regret to “the hell of self-loathing” (Murphy, 1998, pp. 217-18).

Those hearing Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after the crucifixion of Jesus, felt enormous regret, guilt and shame. They cried out, “What must we do?” The answer was conversion: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesu Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (New International Version, 2011, Acts 2:37-38). This conversion experience is the antidote to the challenges of emotional distress over sin—“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (New International Version, 2011, 1 John 1:9). There is a perpetual liberation from self-condemnation from one’s past for “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... (New International Version, 2011, Romans 8:1). Individuals become new persons in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). They are “born again” (Jn. 3:3-5), and live as a “new creation... the old has gone, the new is here” (New International Version, 2011, 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Jesus offers to bring greater emotional relief to anyone who would become His disciple—“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 11:28-29). He promises to give “abundant life” (Jn. 10:10). The Greek word in that text is *zoe*, which implies a quality of life (as contrasted with *bios*—biological life). The prodigal son is a parable about a loving father who would cross every cultural barrier to embrace his son after he came to his senses and returned home (Lk. 15:11-32) (see Nouwen, 1994 and Bailey, 2005 on their incredible background treatment of this parable). Psychological comfort comes in a connection with a loving father—“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (New International Version, 2011, 1 John 3:1).

Eschatological Resolution

Some things will never be fully resolved on this earth. The “eternal dimension” of a human being gives one hope for a resolution of all things in eternity. Life is meaningful because it just doesn’t end with this life with all of one’s blunders, but there is a future where one can be confident that all the “wrongs” we have committed against others will be made right in eternity. There will be no regrets in heaven; only joy in the reality of God’s grace through Christ.

The Idea of Self-forgiveness

Some theologians would advocate the idea of self-forgiveness as a legitimate biblical practice for psychospiritual relief from past transgressions (Kim & Enright, 2014; Kim, 2023). From this writer’s perspective, this idea primarily comes through a rather convoluted reasoning with the biblical texts. The Bible does not explicitly give attention to the idea of *self-forgiveness*

as a mechanism for psychological wellness. However, this is a subject of interest in psychological research, which links self-forgiveness to well-being (Bauer et al, 1992; Murphy, 1998). The major claims of both the theological and social science fields agree that regret, which can regress into self-loathing and self-reproach, is a valid human experience worthy of research. The social sciences have dedicated pursuits of forgiveness (e.g., the Forgiveness Institute), and self-forgiveness with respect to wellness. This has become a growing focus of research (Hall & Fincham, 2005).

From a biblical perspective, forgiveness is found outside of one's self through God's grace (Lk. 15:11-32; Eph. 2:8-10, and redemption by Christ's death on the cross (Eph. 2:1-10; 1 Jn. 2:1-2). However, the instruction to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18; Mt. 19:19; Mk. 12:31; Gal. 5:14) may impinge upon this issue. If you should forgive your neighbor for his transgression against you (Mt. 6:12), should you not forgive your transgression against yourself. "Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you" (New International Version, 2011, Colossians 3:13). However, this idea of forgiving self to relieve psychological trauma seems strangely absent in the biblical corpus. Yet it is addressed in regret research.

You have to consider if one is sinning, is he sinning against himself or God. Certainly, one damages self by sin, but is the sin ultimately against self or against God. The biblical evidence seems to point to the fact that sin is an offense against God the Creator. David makes this point in declaring, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (New International Version, 2011, Psalm 51:4). Therefore, where can the forgiveness come from but from the one who is offended. True we can sin against other human beings and they can extend forgiveness against us, but it is interesting that nowhere is there any mention of

sinning against self. You certainly damage yourself through sin, but the violation is against the laws of the Lawgiver.

There is a significant difference within theological circles about the idea of self-forgiveness as admitted by Kim and Enright (2014). Within theological circles, many assert that the idea of self-forgiveness is an unbiblical concept. It is strangely absent throughout biblical history. If, in fact, it was a valid spiritual experience *vis a vis* all the mental torment of biblical figures, you would expect some treatment of this need. Many feel it is implicit in “loving your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; Mt. 19:19; 22:39; Mk. 12:31; Lk. 10:27; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; Jam. 2:8). The psychological field seems to be in agreement that self-forgiveness is a legitimate and valid intervention and experience (Hall & Fincham, 2005; Wohl, DeShea & Wahkinney, 2008), but not on the basis of the biblical text.

Self-forgiveness has been initially classified as the “stepchild of forgiveness research but has been growing within the field (Hall & Fincham, 2005). The psychological and philosophical fields posit that self-forgiveness contributes to self-respect (Williston, 2012). Indeed, having the ability to forgive others is a virtue, which leads to self-respect (Novitz, 1998). This then leads to the idea of self-forgiveness as a virtue. Dillion (2001), offers that self-forgiveness can be either a virtue or a vice. It could be a vice if it *does not* have a transformational effect upon the person moving the person to humility and repentance. Otherwise, it is a virtue. As aforementioned, if self-forgiveness is a valid theological/spiritual reality, then it is incumbent for those holding this position to make a strong biblical case for its presence in Scripture. I have yet to find a cogent presentation. There is a better alternative to self-forgiveness. It is the idea of self-compassion (Neff, 2011; Pink, 2022, pp. 172-76). “If God accepts us exactly as we are, how dare we not learn to accept ourselves regardless of our failures” (Carter & Narramore, 1979, p. 62)?

Mitigating regret, sorrow, lamenting, and self-loathing, from a biblical perspective is found in a visceral acceptance of the *stunning theological reality* of God’s grace and forgiveness through Christ (Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Cor 15:10; 1 Tim. 1:13-16). To *the extent* that one is able to accept this theological reality, will be to *the extent* of psychological relief (e.g., John Newton, the slave trader and writer of the song, “Amazing Grace”). The psychological will-power forgive one’s self has been found wanting, and many have tumble over into self-harm in this powerlessness within. Is this where the power is found—forgiving oneself or is in accepting the forgiveness from the only one who can forgive sins—God, the Creator (Mt. 9:1-8; Mk. 2:1-12; Lk. 5:17-26; Jn. 5:8-9). So, the focus must not be on the impossible task of self-forgiveness, but in accepting the forgiveness that has been extended in Christ. This is the only way to psychospiritual freedom. Thus, it is not: can I forgive myself? Rather, it is: can I accept forgiveness, and can I learn about myself (depravity, tendencies, selfishness) through my regrets of foolishness and moral failures?

The Bible does not give attention to the idea of *self-forgiveness* as a mechanism for psychological wellness. However, this is a subject of interest in psychological research (Bauer et al, 1992; Murphy, 1998; Wohl, DeShea & Wahkinney, 2008). From a biblical perspective, forgiveness of one’s sins is found outside of one’s self through God’s grace (Lk. 15:11-32; Eph. 2:8-10, and redemption by Christ’s death on the cross (Eph. 2:1-10; 1 Jn. 2:1-2). However, the instruction to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; Mt. 19:19; Mk. 12:31; Gal. 5:14) may impinge upon this issue. If you should forgive your neighbor for his transgression against you (Mt. 6:12), should you not forgive your transgression against yourself. “Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you” (New International Version, 2011, Colossians 3:13). This idea of forgiving self to relieve psychological trauma seems strangely absent in the biblical corpus. Yet, the

mitigating of regret, sorrow, lamenting, and self-loathing is found in a visceral identification and acceptance of the stunning theological reality of God's grace and forgiveness through Christ. To the extent that one is able to accept this theological reality, will be to the extent of psychological relief.

Jesus offers to bring greater emotional relief to anyone who would become His disciple—"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 11:28-29). He promises to give "abundant life" (Jn. 10:10). The Greek word in that text is *zoe*, which implies a quality of life (as contrasted with *bios*—biological life). The prodigal son is a parable about a loving father who would cross every cultural barrier to embrace his son after he came to his senses and returned home (Lk. 15:11-32) (see Nouwen, 1994 and Bailey, 2005 on their incredible background treatment of this parable). Psychological comfort comes in a connection with a loving father—"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (New International Version, 2011, 1 John 3:1). The only hope is found in forgiveness through identifying and accepting the atoning death of Christ (Jn. 3:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 5:1-2; 6:3-6).

Obviously, the spiritual reality of Jesus' atoning death is absent by many psychological researches on this subject (e.g., Pink, 2022; Rubin, 1975). Perhaps it is rooted in the humanistic belief/worldview that man can solve his own struggles apart from God. The popular sociologist and researcher on vulnerability, Brene Brown (2012, 2018), offers little spiritual direction, (including grace and forgiveness) in most of her writings. There is an exception with *Rising Strong* (2015, pp. 7, 40, 149-54), in which, we see a vulnerability with her personal experience

with forgiveness. Psychiatrist, Thompson (2015) presents a spiritual approach to the whole issue of forgiveness. Nearly forty years ago, Menninger (1978) jumpstarted a renewed look at the connection between sin, forgiveness and mental health. Cobb (2019) focuses on self-loathing among women, primarily related to body dysmorphia, accrediting it to hormonal, chemical, physiological, and social sources. She fails to bring into the equation any spiritual remedies.

The humanistic idea of turning inward to self to find psychological relief and affirmation is foreign to the Bible. There are studies that examine turning to God in prayer as a variable for one's emotional well-being (Dossey, 1993; Dossey, 1996; Yancey, 2006). Psychological relief comes in a connection with God. In the vulnerable moments of one's journey we see this profound connection—"when I prayed to you, you gave me strength and you encouraged me" (New International Version, 2011, Ps. 138:3). "Those who look to Him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces" (New Living Translation, 1996, Psalm 34:5). David was "conscious-stricken" after taking a census of the fighting men of Israel: "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing" (New International Version, 2011, 2 Samuel 24:10). David turned *toward God* with his feelings of regret from his youth: "Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good... Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish. Look on my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins" (New International Version, 2011, Psalm 25:7, 16-18). Turning to God vs. inward to self is a proven path.

Hedges/Interdictions—Avoiding the Experience of Regret

It would be derelict to have spent all this time focusing on regret but not giving attention to prohibitions that would work against regret in the first place. For the disciple there are many *hedges* against regret (the proactive side against regret): wisdom (Pr. 1:8-33; Jam. 1:5-6), the Holy Spirit's influence with self-control, the encouragement of community to live the good life; and the spiritual disciplines. The words of Stephen Grellet (1773-1855), the French Quaker and missionary offer a poignant and convicting way with respect to this consideration of regret free living: "I have to live with myself, and so I want to be fit for myself to know. I don't want to stand at the setting sun, and hate myself for the things I have done. I shall pass through this world but once. If, therefore there can be any kindness I can show or any good thing I can do for any fellow being let me do it now...let me not defer it, or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again" (Ratcliffe, 2016).

Surrendering to God

Surrendering your life to God is the ultimate answer to being a flawed human being. This requires trusting Him with your past, present and future. For a flawed human being, trusting in God's grace is the only psychospiritual satisfying answer: "You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you" (New Living Translation, 1996, Isaiah 26:3).

The story of Rembrandt and his painting of the return of the prodigal son from Luke 15:11-31 has been thoroughly examined by Nouwen in his work, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Home Coming* (1994). Rembrandt's painting was the last one he produced before his death, and as Nouwen suggests, he identified with the younger son—the picture of the

prodigal son is really the picture of himself. (At certain points in Rembrandt's life, he is also the older son.) That is perhaps why his painting is so poignant and detailed. His life had many tragic turns, and as Nouwen (1994) put it: "Trying to summarize the many misfortunes of Rembrandt's life can be overwhelming. They are not unlike the prodigal son" (p. 32). Influenced by his reckless life, he lost it all (Ibid, pp. 32-33, 64-66, 97). His regret could have slipped him over to self-loathing, except that he came to his senses, came home and was embraced by his Father. This, without question, is ultimately the only satisfying solution to our regrets with life, and "If God accepts us exactly as we are, how dare we not learn to accept ourselves regardless of our failures" (Carter & Narramore, 1979, p. 62).

Focus on the Positive Side of Regret

Given all of the aforementioned solutions to this challenging negative emotion, there is much to be gained from regret. For Pink (2022) "regret matter," it is "an indispensable emotion," and it "makes us better" (Pink, 2022, p. 13-14). It is kind of like the gift of pain and lepers without this gift damage their lives horribly. So, we must listen to our regrets. Let's try to distill what comes out of regrets for the benefit of a person. *First*, regret informs a person to not repeat the same mistakes, sparing us further misery. *Second*, one finds a deep connection with God and His grace. *Third*, one realizes where his strength and weakness really are and thus can focus on what is the best for the future journey.

One of the toughest teachers in life can be regret, but how we interact with this "teacher" will determine so much of what we gain under his tutelage. Ignore regret and the journey will go worse; learn from regret and the journey will go better. This is the path of wisdom—to learn from our past mistakes, which speaks louder to us than all of our successes.

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