

Lost in the Middle

Chapter 4: The Leaves Are Off the Trees

In A World Where Regret Lives (pp. 103-109)

Midlife is a time of harvest. The leaves are off the trees and there is no putting them back. If childhood is the spring of one's life and youth is the summer, then middle age is the autumn. It is the time when each of us in very important ways reaps what he sows. ... When you've spent your life planting, it seems weird and unnatural to harvest, but you have no choice. You are in your own personal autumn. ... It is particularly hard for the fruit of thankfulness not to be totally covered by the leaves of regret.

There may be no more common human experience than regret. It is with you all the time. ... The idle word, the impulsive choice, or the wayward desire all cause you regret. You wish you could take back choices. You wish you could grab your words out of the air. You wish you could relive situations and rewrite the script of relationships, but you cannot. The leaves are off the trees, and regret is your harvest. ... We all live in a place where regret lives. In the face of this crushing regret, we are not without hope. Regret is a longing that points us to our need.

From Astronaut to Archeologist (pp. 109-112)

From Astronaut to Archeologist: Without realizing it, you progressively slipped from living like an astronaut into living like an archeologist. The lifestyle of the young is all about launching with courage and expectancy into worlds unknown. ... Midlife is like a long-term dig into the mound of your existence, and it is often hard to face what you've uncovered. ... The reason regret has the power to depress, derail, and paralyze us is that regret calls me not only to confess that I have failed, but also to let go of the myth of my own righteousness. The archeological work of midlife exposes who I have been all along. The problem is that what has been exposed doesn't jive with who I thought I was for all these years. Scripture says that if we "claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). .. In our self-righteousness, we tend to recast our own history. ... Yet God knows how crucial it is for us to see [our sin as it really is]. So, as we brush the dirt of time off the artifacts of the past, God puts us in a position to see that any good thing we uncover is the result of His grace. In this way midlife can be the occasion of profound and lasting spiritual change.

Romans 7 and Midlife Regret (pp. 112-114)

¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. ¹⁵For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ¹⁶If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that *it is* good. ¹⁷But now, *it is* no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but *how* to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice. ²⁰Now if I do what I will not *to do*, it is no longer I who do it, but

sin that dwells in me. ²¹I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. ²²For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. ²³But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. ²⁴O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin (Romans 7:14-25).

The reason regret tends to hit us so hard in midlife is that for years we have been convincing ourselves that the problem isn't really us. Perhaps the biggest and most tempting lie that all of us tend to embrace is that our greatest problems exist somewhere *outside* of us. ... When we think, desire, say, and do what is wrong, we experience a God-given unease of heart—conscience. When this happens we all seek heart relief. There are only two ways to find this relief. We can place ourselves once again under the justifying mercies of Christ and receive His forgiveness, or we can erect some system of self-justification that makes what is wrong acceptable to our conscience. ... It's an old argument that goes something like this, "His sin makes my sin not sin." ... Notice how radically different this is from Paul's perspective in Romans 7. The whole logic of the passage is based on the fact that Paul is locating his struggle *inside* of himself. For Paul, the foundational war is not a war with difficult situations (in many places Paul recognizes they exist) or sinful people (Paul tells stories elsewhere of having to deal with them), but a war with the gravitational pull of sin within. Romans 7 can be uncomfortable for us because it takes us to the very place of self-indictment that we have tended to work so hard to avoid.

The Great Surprise (pp. 114-121)

1. *We have tended to be our own personal con man.* The "hook" of a con man always offers you something that you crave. In our sin, we offer ourselves spiritual vacationland that is in reality a stinking swamp of sin. ... When we play the con man and offer ourselves false atonement, we take ourselves off the moral hook. In doing so we not only get in the way of His sanctifying mercies, but we also set ourselves up for moments of shock and dismay when it becomes quite clear that we were not, in fact, as righteous as we thought.

2. *We have signed a premature armistice agreement with our sin nature.* Yes we *are* new creatures, and yes, the controlling power of sin over us *has* been broken, but the presence of sin still remains. This means that the great moral and spiritual war still rages on within us. ... Because of the wonderful atoning work of the Prince of Peace, the war between us and God has ended. But the war of hostility inside of us still rages on. ... Sin and righteousness, the flesh and the Spirit, are at war. There is no peace, only battles won and battles lost. Peace has been purchased. It is guaranteed. It will come. But until then, the war of wars never ceases.

3. *We have fed the beast while being surprised that we have been bitten.* The Bible presents the devil as a roaring lion, seeking to devour (1 Peter 5:8). Perhaps like the zookeepers, we most often get bitten when we have been feeding the beast. We get ourselves in trouble when we feed the beast little morsels of our heart and life. No, we don't want to be swallowed up, but we tend to be naïve about the danger we put

ourselves in. ... All of us tend to be much too naïve when it comes to the presence, power, attractiveness, and danger of sin. All of us, in our own individual ways, feed the beast every day. ... No, we aren't committing the "big" sins, but we are sowing subtle and acceptable seeds of sin that will someday reap a harvest of regret. The regrets we face in midlife result from being much too casual in our battle with sin.

4. We have bandaged our wounds without healing the disease. Listen to the words of Christ to the Pharisees in Matthew 23:25-26: *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.* ... You try to exchange bad behavior for good behavior (the outside of the cup and dish), but that will never work, because the heart (the inside of the cup and dish) has not been addressed. Only when the heart changes will lasting change take place in your behavior as well. ... We all tend to be satisfied with the Pharisee's approach. ... We think lasting change is taking place, but the causal system in the heart has not been addressed. ... Christ came not to bandage symptoms, but to cure our diseases.

If it is true that we have tended to play the con man with ourselves, explaining away our sin; if we have declared victory too soon in our war with sin; if we have fed the very beast that we have tried to escape; and if we have dealt with sin's symptoms while leaving its causes unaddressed, it is no wonder that we are surprised, shocked, and saddened by our legacy. When our harvest comes in, it hurts to admit it is really ours.

Biblical Strategies for Dealing with Regret (pp. 124-133)

1. Enjoy the freedom of confession (1 John 1:8-9). What is confession? It is the freedom to say about yourself what both you and God know is true, without fear of rejection, condemnation, or punishment. Confession is more than an obligation; it is one of the wonderful freedoms of our new life in Christ. ... Confession is powerful and effective. It turns guilt into forgiveness. It turns regret into hope. ... Confession is not only owning responsibility before God and the appropriate people (those whom my sin and failure has affected), but it is refusing to be stuck in our regrets, and refusing to give up hope. It is believing that not only does God forgive me, but He has promised to change me. ... When you come to God with humble and honest confession, He not only promises to *forgive* you, but also to *change* you as well. That is what it means when it says "purify [you] from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:8-9).

2. Embrace God's forgiveness (Ps. 103:11-12; Mi. 7:18-20). Forgiveness means that God chooses not to remember the darkest, most shameful, and most regrettable parts of you and me! And if God turns from these things, I am free to turn from them and move on as well. ... God, whose memory is exhaustive and complete, chooses to remove our sins from His memory. ... And because God does this, He releases us from our bondage to regret. We do not have to live in the paralysis of remorse. ... Because of God's promise of forgiveness, you can look your failure in the face and not be overwhelmed or paralyzed. He lifts your burden of guilt and regret and welcomes you to plant and harvest once again.

3. Embrace God's sovereignty (Gen. 50:20). Our lives are never out of control. No, they are under the careful, wise, loving, and powerful care of the Lord. He is truly sovereign. ... Now, His absolute control is exercised in such a way that it never turns you into a robot. He accomplishes His sovereignty through the choices that you and I make and the actions that we take. His sovereignty does not invalidate our choices, and our choices do not remove His sovereignty. ... I live knowing that I am responsible for the choices I make, while at the same time knowing that God controls the details of my life for my good and for His glory. ... Because God is the definition of true wisdom and the author of order, His timing is always right. He never gets things out of order. He never does something too early or too late. ... Yet in the midyears of life, it is almost impossible to look back and not revisit the question of God's timing. ... As you are looking back, it is important to embrace the freedom and comfort that God's sovereignty gives you. You can take responsibility for what you did, while at the same time, you can rest in God's timing. ... So look back, with honesty and humility, but do not forget that it has all happened under His control. He is always wise, loving, good, righteous, and on time!

4. Clarify your identity (Gal. 2:20). Your assessment of potential is always rooted in your sense of identity. "What you can do" questions are always attached to "who you think you are" answers. The longer we live, the more we will tend to take on a sin and problem-based identity. ... In Galatians 2:20, Paul's identity is not sin or problem-based, but grace-based. He is essentially saying, "This is who I am—a child of God. ... So my potential is as great as His grace and His power." As you do the archeological work of midlife, remember who you really are in Christ. Don't let an unbiblical sense of identity rob you of your hope and your potential. ... As you look forward to the years to come, remember that Christ is your identity and step out with faith and courage.

5. Plant a new harvest (2 Cor. 9:6). The one comfort for farmers and gardeners everywhere is that today's harvest will be followed by another season of planting and harvest. Until we die, no harvest is the final harvest. Our God is the author of new seasons. ... In midlife God calls you to turn from mourning over your previous harvest to planning new and better seeds. ... As you assess your harvest, live with a "new seasons" mentality.

6. Celebrate eternity (1 Cor. 15:19). This life that God has called us to doesn't make any sense without eternity attached to it. It is only the hope and promise of a resurrection out of this life and of an eternity to follow that enables us to continue to live in this fallen world. ... **So here's what to do.** Accept the fact that you are a sinner living in a fallen world, keep reminding yourself that Christ really does live inside of you, and keep your eyes on eternity. ... Whether you're aware of it or not, every moment of regret is a longing for eternity. ... Live with your eyes on eternity. It is the only way to make sense out of what is going on now.

Stand up and walk away from your pile of yesterday's leaves. Take the seeds of a new way into your hands, press them into the soil of your life, and thank God that you will live to see a better harvest (*cp.* Joel 2:25-27).