

A red balloon floats in the upper right corner of the frame. The background is a soft, painterly gradient of yellow at the top, transitioning through green to a deep teal at the bottom, with wispy cloud-like textures.

IF ONLY

LETTING GO OF REGRET

MICHELLE VAN LOON

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	9
<i>Introduction</i>	11
1. Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda Versus Me: Recognizing Regret	17
2. Oh, the Places We Go! Hiding from the Sins We Commit	27
3. Doing a Whole Lot of Nothing: Avoiding the Messes of Others	39
4. I Want What I Have and I Want What You Have Too: Stealing Your Own Life	51
5. Hiding in a Stack of Fig Leaves: When Someone Else's Sin Tries to Write Your Story	61
6. What's in the Vault? Compartmentalizing as a Way to Silence the Past	73
7. The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth: The Confession Cure	83
8. Truce like a River? The Peace That Crosses Our Dividing Walls	97
9. When the Past Becomes the Present: Why Our History Still Tells Tales	109
10. All Things Work Together For . . . : The Story of the Sequel to Our "If Onlys"	123
11. Running with the Pack: When Everyone Is (Just a Little Bit) Responsible, No One Is Responsible	133
<i>Conclusion: Letting Go</i>	143
<i>Appendix A: Counseling Q&A</i>	149
<i>Appendix B: Key Scriptures Featured in Each Chapter</i>	153
<i>Notes</i>	155

ONE

WOULDA, COULDA, SHOULDA VERSUS ME

RECOGNIZING REGRET

*Of all the words of mice and men, the saddest are,
“It might have been.”*

—Kurt Vonnegut



I was sitting in a busy fast food joint at lunchtime with my three preteen kids. One moment, I was eating an order of french fries; the next, without warning, I began to sob. It was not a dignified, gentle, Jane Austen-heroine light mist that could be staunched with a clean lace hankie, but a full-on blubber that soon included snot ribbons dripping from my chin.

My three preteen kids could do nothing but inhale the rest of their burgers in awkward silence while simultaneously hoping that the ground would open up and swallow them alive so they didn't have to die of embarrassment. The one saving grace of this awkward moment was that the kids thought that my tears were a result of a traumatic event that had happened in our living room a couple of hours earlier.

I didn't have words to explain to them that the painful episode had almost instantly drained a decade-old well of sorrow buried inside of me; exposing a deep regret, polished diamond-bright by the passing of time.

I couldn't ignore my regret any longer, nor could I re-bury it. It was too big. Though I thought I'd learned to live with it, in the restaurant that day I realized that I'd done little more than make a truce with my regret.

Jesus didn't add a regret clause when he promised his followers abundant life ("I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" [John 10:10]) that read "except in cases where the party of the second part has stumbled, struggled, or sinned."

It didn't much matter. I'd penciled in the clause myself.

Dismissing Remorse

We do something we regret, and we feel remorse about it. Those who follow Christ trust that his life, death, and resurrection save us from our sins, but he often uses the consequences of those sins to refine us. If we don't allow our remorse to help us recognize

those consequences for what they are, they can become a perfect breeding ground for regret.

Just a couple of hours before my midday meltdown, I had placed our first foster baby into the long-waiting arms of her adoptive mother. I'd brought Rhiannon home from the hospital and cared for her night and day for the first six weeks of her life. I'd known from the start she was headed for a wonderful adoptive family's home, but I realized that the only way I'd be able to be a good foster mother was to be a good mom. I needed to care for this child as if she were my own.

While this no-holds-barred love was the best possible way for Rhiannon to begin her life, it was a perfect recipe for a broken heart for me.

After I'd placed the baby into the arms of her adoptive mom, my kids and I shed some tears as we all said good-bye to Rhiannon and wished her new family well. But as we sat in the restaurant at lunch, sorrow's drill hit my soul's bedrock. At the time, I credited my public breakdown to the obvious: I'd just said good-bye to a little baby who had snuggled into me and fell asleep against my heart with the kind of trust that only a completely dependent newborn is capable of. She'd given me her first toothless smiles in return.

Rhiannon's departure was a trigger, to be sure. But my deep grief overflowed as I looked at my own three kids at the restaurant that day and realized how very quickly our time together was passing. I was a little more than midway through my active parenting years. Perhaps a perceptive counselor would have suggested to me that deciding to foster newborns was my way of trying to hold onto the past. I would have gone the counselor one better. I would have told him or her that I wasn't trying to recapture my past. I was trying to rewrite it in order to erase one of my deepest regrets.

The seeds of my sorrow were planted almost ten years earlier. July 25, 1986—a red-letter day, the day my youngest child was born. It should have been one of the most joyful days of my life.

It was, and it was one of the saddest, too. My husband, Bill, and I had decided during that pregnancy that three children were enough. Enough, as in, “I really couldn’t handle another slice of that triple-chocolate cheesecake. I’m stuffed.” We were about to have our third baby in as many years, and we were stuffed. More accurately, we were depleted by the daily marathon of life with three children under three.

We’d avoided the topic of our decision in our prayers to God. We never asked him his opinion about our family size. Instead, we told one another we just couldn’t handle any more. Three kids were enough.

My tubal ligation was scheduled for the day our youngest was born. “It’s easier to do the procedure right after a birth,” my obstetrician had explained.

After Jacob was born, I was wheeled into surgery, still high on the ecstasy of a healthy birth and meeting our beautiful, peaceful little boy. As the surgical team was doing their prep work, my obstetrician—the man who’d delivered my baby just a couple of hours earlier—stopped and looked intently at me.

“You know, you don’t have to do this,” he said after a pregnant moment. “Are you sure you’re ready to go ahead with the procedure?”

I’ve always wondered what prompted him to ask that question. Maybe he asked it of all of his young patients. I was only twenty-seven years old at the time. One thing I do know: his question felt as if the voice of God had tried to preempt my regularly scheduled program.

My mind raced: What would Bill say if I backed out now? How would we handle whatever it was that was coming next? The babies seemed to be coming fast and furious in our household, and our other attempts to slow the flow had not been successful. My courage was at an all-time low.

I well knew the Scripture passage that affirmed that children were a gift from God:

Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court. (Ps. 127:3-5)

In theory, I affirmed the truth of these words. I had the distinct sense that obeying God in that moment meant telling the doctor not to go ahead with the tubal ligation. Not that day. Probably not ever.

I had no idea how I was supposed to walk out this obedience in real time, so I reverted to my default setting. I did what seemed right in my own eyes.

I looked away from the doctor's gaze. "I'm sure. Do it." God's voice fell silent as the anesthesiologist put the mask over my face. The world went black.

I didn't have time to process the regret of that moment for months. Life was overflowing with the demands of our young family. One warm summer day, as I was watching my kids splash in the inflatable kiddie pool in our tiny backyard, remorse hit me like a freight train. I'd never be pregnant again.

What had I done? I had a sudden, heart-stopping moment as I wondered if I'd committed an unforgivable sin. The next moment, I was certain I had because I didn't think I'd ever be able to forgive myself. When I confessed my deep regret to my husband, he confessed that he'd had a few guilt pangs of his own about our decision. A note here: our individual convictions on this subject are not prescriptions for the decisions of others. Our regret had much to do with making a long-term, permanent decision about our family based on our changeable emotions at the time instead of prayerful deliberation.

We learned that the tubal had left me with female plumbing problems. I had scarred inside after the procedure. If I hadn't committed the unpardonable sin, I certainly managed to indulge in an irreversible one.

My unresolved guilt festered for nearly a decade. When we began attending a church populated by a number of adoptive and foster families, I wondered if God had hit the family reset button for us. The finances required for adoption were daunting, to say the least, but we thought we could try foster parenting and see where it took us. Our kids were excited at the prospect of having a little baby come to live with us for a while. The social worker that evaluated our family and home prior to granting us a foster license told us we were a perfect family for the task.

She knew this was going to be a part of our family's ministry but had no idea that foster care was both penance and prayer for me. My unvoiced hope was that maybe one of the foster babies would be left with us—things like that happened once in a while, I knew—and it would be a sign that God really had forgiven me and that I was worthy to mother another child in spite of my decision to have a tubal ligation a decade earlier.

My grief in the restaurant the day Rhiannon left us was sadness at letting her go, but also a revelatory moment when I began to come to terms with the fact that I could not go back to fix the past. My regret had long anchored me to that single disobedient moment in time. My response to the remorse I felt was to beat myself up with my failure in my own wrongheaded attempt to somehow make myself right with God. I wanted so much to be able to right my wrong, to turn my “if only” into a do-over.

I felt a new wave of sorrow as I accepted the fact that there were not going to be any do-overs in this area of my life. Jesus had been waiting and working through all of this to free me from my self-punishment habit. That fresh sorrow marked the reality that I'd finally begun to surrender to God by allowing remorse to do its work in me. *The Message* paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 7:10 explains the work of this kind of godly sorrow: “Distress that drives us to God does that. It turns us around. It gets us back in the way of salvation. We never regret that kind of pain. But those who let

distress drive them away from God are full of regrets, end up on a deathbed of regrets.”

I also began to discover that day how our loving God can redeem our regrets.

The Past on “Repeat”

Regret serves a training purpose in our lives. One of the first things newborns discover is that their cry creates a response from the world: warm milk, comforting arms, a dry diaper. This cause-and-effect interaction with the world teaches babies how the world works.

It doesn’t take long before we graduate to some version of the old “the dog ate my homework” dodge to avoid uncomfortable short-term consequences. As we move toward adulthood, one of our greatest strengths is our idealism. The passion that fuels our idealism also feeds idealism’s trigger-happy pal—impulsiveness. When we’re young, we’re prone to making quick decisions without considering long-term consequences. As a result, we’re also prone to accumulating a nice collection of unprocessed regrets that we may not fully realize until we approach midlife.

I wonder how many times Adam and Eve replayed the moment they bit into the forbidden fruit throughout the rest of their long lives (Gen. 3:1-7) or how many times Esau cursed himself for his impatience at trading his inheritance and his father’s blessing for a bowl of lentils (Gen. 25:24-34). Judas’s regret at betraying his friend Jesus drove him to suicide (Matt. 27:1-5).

In the weeks after my lunchtime meltdown, I took a small first step in facing my regrets by intentionally choosing not to keep hitting the “repeat” button on my decision. I wanted to be intentional about reflecting on the good God had brought into my life despite my bad choices, something I really hadn’t done very often. The exercise offered me a new appreciation for the sovereignty of God. If it is true that God weaves all things together for both our good and his glory (Rom. 8:28), then it follows that he is able to redeem

our sinful decisions in order to serve his purposes. I realized that while my life may have been less fruitful as a result of the consequences of my choice, it hadn't been exactly barren. Mothering three beautiful children, helping my husband as he finished college while working full time, caring for friends, doing the work God had given me, learning, serving in a couple of meaningful ministry roles—each one bore the imprint of eternity. The exercise didn't instantly erase every regret, but it did serve to interrupt the unhealthy cycle of self-recrimination in which I'd been trapped with some spiritually nourishing, God-glorifying thanksgiving.

Pausing my endless loop of "if only" opened my ears to the lyrics of that tired song to which I'd been dancing and dancing and dancing. It was time to learn some new steps.

Reflection Questions

1. What are some of your longest-standing regrets?
2. In what ways can you see how your past regrets have affected your present life? How do they shape the way you think about your future?
3. What is one positive thing that has happened in your life as a result of a past regret?
4. If you were going to write a letter to a younger version of you just before you made a decision you now know would lead to regret, what would you say to yourself? What do you think God might say to that younger version of you?

Prayer

O my Redeemer, here I am. Regrets and all.

I am sensing how my own collection of “if onlys” tethers me to the past. I have beaten myself up with the past I thought would please you better than the past I have lived. Maybe I believed you would have been there somehow more fully in that perfect past I’ve dreamed for myself. I’m sorry for thinking so foolishly. You are Lord, and there is nowhere I’ve been that is a surprise to you.

You never intended me to carry the baggage of my past into my present. Help me to recognize the baggage, Lord. And help me to drop it, then turn those empty palms to you in surrender. It is only from a place of surrender that you can come to set me free from the prison of my regrets so I can follow you fully, wholeheartedly, and fearlessly into the future.

Please teach me some new steps, the ones that will help me follow you out of this place of regret in which I’ve been living. I pray this in the name of the One who came to set captives free.

Amen.

“If Only delivers powerful tools to help readers grow, heal, and break free of the chains of the past.”

—Shelly Beach, author, *Love Letters from the Edge*

“In this warmly rich and insightful book, Michelle Van Loon becomes for us God’s messenger of grace, one who helps us unlock our prison doors. Read this book and be set free to live the abundant life Jesus offers.”

—Marlena Graves, author, *A Beautiful Disaster*

• • •

The relationship that didn’t work out.

The medical decision that led to negative consequences.

The career choice that didn’t turn out the way you planned.

Regret. It can imprison us in the past, deplete our present, and disable our future. A seemingly endless loop of “if onlys” wears deep ruts in the souls of those with unresolved regret as we attempt to overwrite our mistakes and poor choices.

If Only: Letting Go of Regret will help you accept God’s healing as you learn to let go of the “woulda, coulda, shoulda” thoughts in your life. Find out how Christ can redeem our regrets for his glory and our good. In him, past regrets can be transformed into present wisdom and a flourishing future.

• • •

MICHELLE VAN LOON is a writer whose body of work includes two books about the parables, articles in four devotional projects, regular contributions to *Christianity Today’s* popular her.meneutics blog for women, and blogging for Patheos.com.

RELIGION / Christian Life / Personal Growth