

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.