

Buzz King

buzz@BuzzKing.com

<https://BuzzKing.com>

Sirach 32:19, New Revised Standard Version

*Do nothing without deliberation,
but when you have acted, do not regret it.*

2 Timothy 4:6–8, New Living Translation

⁶As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. ⁸And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his appearing.

Regret.

As most of you know, I retired early from a position in the engineering school at CU-Boulder. I then attended seminary. As part of the process of being ordained in the United Methodist Church, I was advised to get some experience as a chaplain. And so, I'm working now as a hospital chaplain two days a week. One night, a while back, I gazed into a dim room where a TV was on. The volume was down. He was facing the TV, but the man in the room wasn't watching the TV. He seemed to be either dozing off with his eyes open or in deep thought. I used

the hand cleaner like I'm supposed to every time I enter a room. I knocked on his door and walked in. He turned slowly to look at me. I told him that my name was Buzz and that I was a chaplain, and that the medical staff thought that he might want to talk to me. It took a while, but slowly he began to talk.

This man was about my age and was in the hospital because of alcoholism. He had several serious medical conditions resulting from four decades of drinking a liter or so of hard liquor a day. He spoke sorrowfully of how he had broken his mother's heart, about the son and the daughter and the grandchildren who wanted nothing to do with him. He had a badly damaged liver and heart disease. He was in pain because of damage to his pancreas. We talked about how alcoholism was a disease and he was not responsible for developing it. But that wasn't enough for him to forgive himself. His eyes were brimming with tears as he told me that he had done so many wrong things in his life, that he had made so many terrible mistakes, and that he couldn't blame them all on alcohol. He had no family visiting him. He had come to the hospital on his own, specifically to be treated for his alcoholism; but now, he just wanted to leave, against medical advice. He was so full of regret that he couldn't even think of trying to get better.

PAUSE.

I'll get back to this gentleman.

I thought I would have some fun with our readings today. The second one, the passage from the New Testament, is very famous and often quoted. The first passage is extremely obscure because it doesn't even come from what most Protestant churches consider the canon, the official Bible. It's from the Apocrypha, a collection of books that can be found in some Bible translations, including the New Revised Standard Version, which is found in many United Methodist churches. The books of the Apocrypha are associated with the Old Testament, but they are missing from most Protestant pew Bibles. Sirach is considered a book of Wisdom and some of it reads a lot like the Book of Proverbs. Sirach dates from about 200 B.C. The author of this book is thought to have been a teacher of young people. In Israel during the time of its writing, these so-called "Wisdom" teachers trained people for professional careers. Scholars think that the Book of Sirach was highly influential on the writing of the New Testament. In particular, the authors of the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke seem to have been very familiar with it.

Our passage from Sirach tells us to think before we act. But it also tells us that once an act is in the past, we should look forward and not backward. One

version of the Bible, the Good News Bible, translates this passage from Sirach as:

“Never do anything without thinking it through, and once you have done something, don’t look back and wish you had done something else.” This passage acknowledges that we all make mistakes, sometimes very serious ones, but that God wants us to carry on, to live for the future.

This is what I tried to tell this man that night in that dim hospital room.

PAUSE.

Our second Bible passage for today is from the 2nd Book of Timothy.

Traditionally, it’s believed to be a letter written to the young evangelist Timothy by his mentor Paul, although there are scholars who feel that Paul didn’t write it. They note that parts of the letter don’t seem to be consistent with the way Paul wrote in the other letters of his in the New Testament.

2nd Timothy is clearly a goodbye letter. Paul sees himself as being at the end of his life. Paul is comparing himself to a sacrifice being offered up by the priests of the synagogue: his life is being poured out, as an offering to God. There is something subtle and very powerful in this passage. He fought the good fight as a faithful believer. But what does he tell us at the end of his life? That all of us

can have the same eternal future as him. He writes that the prize is not just for him but for all who look forward to the return of Jesus Christ.

And this is true no matter what our past looks like. There's something that we can hold onto when we feel overwhelmed by regret. All of us, without any exception, can look forward to a life with Christ. This is true even if we have made serious mistakes in life. Remember that Paul had once been Saul, a man who hunted down Christians and had them imprisoned and put to death. He wasn't worried about what he had done in the past.

Now, truthfully, after Saul spoke with Jesus on the road to Damascus and became Paul, he was truly a different person. His life from then on out was extraordinary, to put it mildly. By the time he was being poured out as an offering, the evangelist had a lot of saved souls under his belt. He did indeed fight the good fight. And yet, by modern standards, by the way we tend to judge people today, he wasn't very successful. After he became a follower of Jesus, he lived a tough life on the street. He was forever depending on the handouts of others. He never married and never built a powerful family dynasty. He never even had permanent home. He spent his life on his feet, counseling others and

doing little for himself. He got locked up multiple times, and he was most likely executed. He was just a crazy Christian.

Ultimately, Paul teaches us a big lesson about modern life: it isn't whether we live successful lives by earthly standards. It's whether we can turn things around and decide what God wants us to do. Along the way, we might suffer many setbacks, but each time, we have the opportunity to be regenerated by God's grace. We can then live God's way for a day or for thirty years, however much time God gives us. And here's the great part: in God's eyes, the amount of time is irrelevant.

PAUSE.

Let's bet back to our passage from the Apocrypha. One of the reasons that I chose the passage from Sirach for today is that it says so much in so few words. It tells us to think first. So many horrible mistakes come from not pausing for the few moments it takes to see the obvious. But it also tells us that once you've done it, move on.

We are forced to make a lot of decisions in our lives, and in a fast changing world, that can be very stressful. For most of human history, people lived the same lives as their parents, and they were slow lives. It made a lot of decisions

easy to make: do what your mother and father did. But today, we must raise our kids to have a very high level of maturity at a very young age. It's so easy to damage your life with a snap decision you didn't see coming. Someone flips us off in traffic or offers us a hit of something illegal or we're tempted by an investment deal that is too good to be true.

And a nonstop series of major decisions in life can weigh very heavy on us. But God gives us a break by freeing us from the regrets of our past.

PAUSE.

One more thing about our second passage, from 2nd Timothy. As I said, there are many scholars who do not believe that Paul the evangelist, the author of so much of the New Testament, wrote 2nd Timothy. One argument that has been made concerns the very passage we are using today. Why would Paul be talking only about his actions and his success, and not about his own weaknesses? And why wouldn't Paul give the credit for his reward entirely to the grace of God, rather than to the earthly actions of Paul himself? After all, Paul is the man who was broken by his previous life of sin as Saul and then devoted his life to serving his forgiving God. He certainly knew the power and gift of God's grace, and he wrote about this over and over in his other letters in the New Testament.

Well, maybe Paul did write this letter. And maybe he was being modest after all. Paul is telling us that even though we haven't traveled by foot for thirty years spreading the word and radically expanding the church, we are in line to receive the same reward as he was about to receive. In other words, his past actions – good or bad - aren't the point. And he acknowledges it.

PAUSE.

As I said goodbye to that man in the dim hospital room, I took his hand and asked him to please listen to the medical staff and not leave the hospital AMA as the medical people say – Against Medical Advice. Chaplains are there to serve patients, family members, staff, anyone in the hospital who needs someone to talk to. But usually, there's nothing we can fix. It's very easy for someone like me – an engineer and computer programmer – to feel frustrated that there isn't a well-defined problem I can walk into a room and solve. And yes, I was feeling hopeless as I started to turn away.

Quietly, I told that man that God believes in him and blesses him. He looked up to me and smiled softly. His lips formed the words, "I know."

And God wants all of us to know. We can live without regret. Whether we have always had a habit of thinking things through before we act, or whether we

have a long history of doing rash and foolish things, it's always right now that matters. Always.

The past is not what matters to God. God does not judge us the way society does. It's not our accomplishments, how much money we have stockpiled, how important we are at work, or whether people envy the series of clever decisions that have made us king of the hill. It's what's in our heart today and whether we are determined to serve God and to serve God's people tomorrow. That's the incredible thing about being a child of God.

There is never any need to stew with regret. The person with the biggest and even godliest accomplishments is equal in God's eternal eye to the person who has made countless mistakes. All we need to do is turn to God for forgiveness and for regenerative grace.

This frees us to live vibrant lives of service to God and to each other.

PAUSE.

I'd like to end with a prayer. Please pray with me.

God, in Numbers 23:19, we are told that you are not a human who speaks falsely, nor a mortal, who feels regret. We are assured that you are dependable, that you keep your promises. But we are much weaker than you. We are

imperfect. We sometimes fail to fulfill our promises. We sometimes break the hearts of our loved ones. We sometimes break your heart.

But you are always there with your limitless forgiveness. We ask that you guide us as we strive to share the good news of your regenerative grace. We pray that all people come to learn that you have an extra measure of love for those who have made mistakes, but wish to change and to embrace the teachings of your son.

Thank you for allowing us to live lives free of regret. And for letting us start a new life simply by turning to you. For letting us start a new life every day, if we must. Unlike the forgiveness of society, you never tire of forgiving and you put no bounds on what you will forgive. You find joy each time we return to you. And we find joy in rededicating our lives to you and to our fellow children of God.

Amen.