



Episode 79: Find Relief From Regret

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 79.

This is a podcast all about making decisions. It's also a podcast about making a life.

If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place.

For a few minutes each week, I'll offer a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step.

Now, The Next Right Thing is not only a podcast, it's also a book. You can find *The Next Right Thing* at a bookstore near you or at your favorite online retailer.

Last week, in addition to our regular Tuesday episode, we also released a special bonus episode as part of a short series to celebrate the arrival of *The Next Right Thing* book into the world. Last week's bonus episode was with Annie F. Downs and we talked about her decision-making process - both the logic of it and the fear behind some of her life decisions. It's the episode right before this one so you can find it easily if you want to hear it. This week we'll have another bonus coming your way so you can be on the lookout for that one.

This would be a good time to mention if you haven't subscribed to the podcast yet, do your future self a favor and hit that subscribe button in your favorite podcast listening app so that when these bonus episodes drop, they'll magically appear in your podcast feed.

Now on to today's episode obviously, we talk a lot here, every week, about making decisions always with the simple mantra of doing the next right thing.

One thing we haven't talked a lot about? What if you try to do the next right thing but later you look back and realize it wasn't the right thing after all? What do we do when our next right thing turns out to be wrong? And how do we handle regret?

If you've struggled with this question in your own decision-making, I hope to offer a little relief today. Listen in.

Maybe you don't struggle much with regret. It could be because you haven't made regrettable choices in your life. But it could also be that you don't struggle with regret because regret can only be uncovered upon reflection. And you're not a person who lives in the past. This could be a function of your personality or your own coping skills, and being a forward-looking person has its gifts, to be sure. But there may also be regrets that linger beneath the surface for you that you're running from and you don't even realize it.

But then there is the other extreme, you may be someone who is so wrapped up in regret that you can't see straight, can't find the joy, and can't untangle yourself enough to move forward in a healthy way. Regret is holding you hostage and I hope your next right thing is to be set free today.

I want to invite you to simply listen in to a couple of stories I have to tell. They're both about regret — one that belongs to someone else, and one that belongs to me. In both, there's hope. And during this Holy Week, I hope you see it and can find a little hope of your own.

My dad drank beer everyday until I was ten years old. I didn't have to go to college to learn what 'passed out drunk' looked like. He snored on the floor in the early evenings while we watched TV. We tossed a shoe or twenty in his direction during *Little House on the Prairie* because his snoring was so loud we couldn't hear the details of what was happening in Walnut Grove. I thought all the world's dads came home and fell asleep on the floor. It was normal and it didn't feel like a big deal.

It was only years later, that I realized the reason for his long evening naps.

Beer was as much a part of my family growing up as stockings at Christmas, white cake on our birthdays, and the kittens living in our shed. I didn't question it, didn't wonder about it, and didn't know to blame it for my own insecurities.

Dad stopped drinking when he was thirty-five and I was maybe around ten or eleven. He didn't stop because someone said the right thing, lectured the right way, or loved him enough. He didn't stop because I was a good girl or because mom made his favorite breakfast or because any of us asked him to. He made the choice to stop drinking because he wanted to stop. I see it as a miracle.

Even though addiction is part of our family story, it isn't the whole story. And it isn't the *finished* story. Addiction didn't win. But for years, it seemed like it would. And if you talked to Dad today and asked him if he regretted those years, I'm not sure he could find the words to tell you how much.

Today, my parents have been married for over 45 years. We look to them for wisdom and for counsel. We consider them friends. We laugh together. We plan together. We work together. We've dreamed together.

The same God who turned water into wine turns alcoholics into dreamers.

It doesn't make sense and those two things don't seem to go together, but they do, somehow. And I don't have to understand it for it to change my life.

The regret didn't turn to hope overnight. But it did turn. And that's where the hope comes in. That's the first story.

Here's story number two.

My husband's dad, Frank, was diagnosed with lung cancer in October 2010. By spring, it was clear the treatment could only prolong his life by months, not years, and we started to approach

his care from the perspective of peace and comfort rather than any expectation for long-term remission.

Now, during this time I was preparing for the launch of my very first book. I was setting meetings, creating a launch plan the best I knew how to do at the time as a new author, and I was making plans as it related to that book. Part of my marketing plan for that book was to partner with a marketing team who lived out of state so I made plans to fly them in to Charlotte and have a day together.

I bought their plane tickets on my own dime and scheduled the hour and a half drive to Charlotte for a day that worked both for them and for us in late July. John and I talked about it and we both felt like this date would work. We knew his Dad wasn't well, but there was no way of knowing how well he would be doing a few months from now and besides, we couldn't put everything on hold could we? We still had to make some plans.

The date came for the team to arrive and it was during a week when John's dad had taken a turn. Still, the doctors and nurses said he could go on like this for many weeks even a month, and so we carried on with our plans as normal and I just did the next right thing I knew to do at the time. The team flew in, I drove down to Charlotte, and we had our meeting. I stayed in touch with John throughout the day.

But as our meeting came to a close, John's messages became more dire. I left the meeting to try to make it home, but as I sat at a stoplight still in Charlotte, behind a line of cars headed toward the onramp to the highway, my phone rang and I knew what John would say on the other end of the line.

Frank had died just minutes before as the family stayed beside him in his hospital room. I still had an hour and a half drive in front of me. The sadness and regret descended on me like a weight and if I think about it too long right now, I can still feel it in my chests nearly 8 years later. *I should have been there. I should have canceled my meeting and stayed home. Why didn't I cancel? What was I thinking?*

Regret always shows up pointing a finger, chanting a string of unanswerable, impossible questions. The questions repeat their minor chord, refusing to resolve, stuck in your head on a loop.

If you could sit and talk with Dad, I'm sure he could tell you how much he regrets those years he sacrificed at the altar of addiction. He wishes he could go back and choose differently. And if you could talk with me right now, I'll tell you plainly how desperately I wish I could take back my decision to drive to Charlotte that day. I wish I could go back and choose differently.

These are different kinds of regrets, but the feeling is similar - time lost that you can't get back, choices made that you wish were different, steps taken you wish you could undo.

Regret can take on many forms. It can be a result of a poor or immoral choice, an uninformed choice, or simply a choice or direction that was maybe innocent on it's own but it ended up leading to a complication, an embarrassment, a difficulty you wish you could have avoided or a grief you wish you could have helped ease.

When it comes to making life decisions and being so keenly aware of past ones that we regret or wish turned out differently, I want to gently invite you to turn with me to the only place that offers any hope at all. And that is into the presence of God.

Here in the midst of this week before Easter, it's one thing to consider the events of the crucifixion from history, that this is something that really did happen to an innocent man all those many years ago.

In one of my Lenten devotionals, *Bread and Wine*, Barbara Brown Taylor says this,

“He offered himself as a mirror they could see themselves in, and they were so appalled by what they saw that they smashed it. They smashed him every way they could.”

This is the second way to see the crucifixion. This is also true. Not only was the crucifixion a historical event, it was also a personal one. Many pastors and teachers this time of year point out that because of our own sin, we are the ones calling for him to be crucified. Like Taylor says, we

smash the truth we see of ourselves in His presence. We can't look upon our own inadequacy with any peace. It's just too terrible. Sometimes regret feels like that. Rather than face it, we want to smash it and refuse to look at the consequences, or we dwell so deeply in regret that we can't find our way out.

But there's a third perspective and too often we stop short of getting there. Because it's another thing altogether to look at the truth of scripture and remember this: *When he died, I died with him.*

Instead of the impersonal observer watching from thousands of years later or even the one I'm imagining myself among the dirty crowd who killed him, Jesus brings me closer.

He puts me on the cross with him. He hid me within him and absorbed the punishment on my behalf — my poor choices, my uniformed choices, my flat out wrong choices — and there, in that place, he sets me free.

And so in a very real, very strange and mysterious way? Our life-perspective as believers is one of a people who have died. And when Jesus rose again, we rose up, too.

Even while we walk the dusty roads of this gritty, beautiful, heartbroken world, we have been made new.

This Holy Week, let's not simply remember something that happened to Jesus.

Let's remember something that happened to us. Scripture says,

“If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin, because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.” Romans 6:5-7

This is the Word of the Lord, it is absolutely true and it is given to us in love.

Good Friday promises that nothing can separate us from the love of God because *love chose to be separated from Himself instead.*

God turned on himself for our sake.

He tore himself apart so that our brokenness, our betrayal, our addiction, our mistakes, our poor judgments, our regrets and our if only's wouldn't be the end of our story.

Jesus was separated so you will never have to be separate again.

Even when it seems like you're fighting a losing battle.

Even when it seems like hope is dead.

Hope *did* die. But Hope didn't stay dead.

You do not have to undo things.

You do not have to pay for your own wrongs.

You do not have to wallow any more.

You may be in the valley of the shadow of death but you do not have to slow down, lie down, or stop. In Christ, you walk through. There is hope. And you are free.

Be relentlessly gentle with yourself today. Starting now, what is your next right thing?

Thanks for listening to episode 79 of The Next Right Thing.

If you're struggling with regret and can't seem to shake it, my prayer for you is that during this Holy Week, our friend Jesus would be the kindest of companions for you with you around you and within you. That you would know his hand extended toward you is not one that holds a grudge, a list, or a reprimand.

He just wants to be with you.

A few resources for you before we close. My dad the now sober alcoholic wrote down our family story in a book he published several years ago called *A Family Shaped by Grace*. His

name is Gary Morland and you can find his book as well as my new book, *The Next Right Thing*, online or at a bookstore near you.

You can find me at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman.

I'll end now with a few words also from Dad in a little ebook he wrote called Scary Hope:

“I hope you see hope and good where you are right now. I hope you accept that each moment is a step on a journey and part of a bigger and better thing, but the journey can be scary. I hope you grow in connecting the dots between the moments, the scary journey, and the bigger, better thing. I hope you think and dream, but pursue your hope with faith and action. I hope you spend more time pursuing than regretting, second-guessing and woe-is-me'ing. I hope you accept confusion, questions, crooked lines, fatigue, fog, loneliness, darkness, rejection, and low self-esteem as part of the journey of hope . . . Finding strength in the Lord your God is no guarantee your hope will be fulfilled. But it is strength for one more step than you think is possible. Sometimes the next step is all you've got. Take it.”

Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.