

Does God Have Regrets?

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Most of us here this morning have probably lived long enough to have at least a few regrets in this life. I am right around the age when I suppose I should probably be having some kind of a mid-life crisis, so I took a few minutes this week to do a quick search of some of the most common regrets people have when they reach their 50's. Among the highlights (or perhaps the lowlights) of some of the regrets people have, one of the most common regrets people have is quitting school – perhaps getting very close to getting a degree, but then stepping away from it for a time when they were younger, and then never getting back to it. By the time they get to their 50's others look back and regret working too much, or not saving enough, not taking vacation time, not traveling more, not eating better, not spending more time with their parents, not paying enough attention to their children, not standing up to bullies; some regret rebelling as teens, not visiting a dying relative; others regret holding a grudge, cheating on a spouse, not having children, and on and on. Obviously, some of these are more serious than others, but most of us have regrets.

With this in mind, I'd like for us to study a rather unusual request. I found it written on a piece of paper on top of a pile in my office, so it's rather recent, but I can't remember why I wrote it down. I don't know whether this was a comment in class a few weeks ago, I don't know whether one of you called and asked me this in the middle of the night, but the note simply said, "God regretting things," and then there were two bullet points underneath that, "1.) Making man, and 2.) Saul as king." So, if this is something I wrote on my own in the middle of the night, I want to congratulate myself on asking a weird question, but if this came from one of you, I would love it if you could remind me of that after worship this morning! But today, I want us to look at this question: Does God have regrets?

And since two examples are given, I want to start by at least quoting these two passages. The first is in Genesis 6:5-8 (p. 8). We'll get back to both of these references in a bit, but let's just start with the quick references. Again, the first reference goes back to Genesis 6:5-8,

⁵ Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. ⁷ The Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them." ⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

The second reference goes back to 1 Samuel 15:10-11 (p. 461),

¹⁰ Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, ¹¹ “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands.” And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night.

In addition to these two that were mentioned in the sermon request, there are several others. But I think even with these two, most of us can see at least the potential of a problem here. And the issue is made even worse by some of the older translations that have God “**repenting**.” Instead of using the word “**regret**,” they use the word “**repent**.” But regardless of the word that is used, most of us see the issue: If God is all-knowing, if God can truly see into the future, how do we handle God having regrets? Do we compare it to one of us wishing that we had saved more for retirement or regretting not spending more time with our children? Was God surprised? Was God unable to see what was coming? Looking back on it, does God wish that he would have done something differently? Otherwise, why would he have regrets if he knew in advance what would happen but chose to do it anyway? So, in the first of these examples, God says that he is “**sorry**” that he made man on the earth. So the question is: If he regrets making man, and if God truly knows the future, then why didn’t God just not make man in the first place? And the same goes for King Saul. He’s sorry he made Saul king, but if God is all-knowing, then why didn’t God anticipate this regret and not make Saul king in the first place?

Now, to answer these questions, I’d like to step away from our normal practice of sticking with one passage of scripture, and the reason is: We have quite a few passages to consider here! So, I want us to start by noting two basic ideas we need to consider. Then, based on what we’ve learned, we’ll go back and look at the two examples from the original question. And then I want us to close by asking what all of this really means for us.

I. But first, let us look at TWO BASIC PRINCIPLES to keep in mind here.

And we plan on looking at several passages on each of these, so I hope you will really try to keep up with this and look these up in your own Bible. This is not one of those days when we’ll be keeping our Bibles open to one passage. This is a day for flipping back and forth. This is a day for using our thumbs on a phone, or whatever. But, I plan on giving all of us a chance to get to each one. I hate it when somebody gives some rapid-fire list of scriptures without giving me the chance to look each one up, and I don’t plan on doing that to you. So, let’s start with some basic concepts.

A. And we start with the idea that GOD DOES KNOW THE FUTURE.

We have a number of passages that teach this, scattered all throughout the Bible. I’ve put the references on the wall up here to give you a chance to beat me to each one. But the first passage is 1 John 3:19-20 (p. 1907). Certainly this is not the main point of 1 John, that’s the danger of taking so many passages out of context like this, but the reference does support the idea that God does know the future. Notice, please, 1 John 3:19-20, where John says, “**We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.**” Again, this isn’t the main point of 1 John, but in verse 20, John does refer to the fact that God “**knows all things.**” So we start with this: God knows everything.

We then move to a number of passages in the Old Testament, starting with Psalm 139:1-4 (p. 992). I've put the next few references in the order they are in the Bible, just to make it a bit easier to find each one. Psalm 139 was written by King David, and David is making the point that God knows everything there is to know about him. And toward the end of this reference, notice that this knowledge includes knowing what David will do in the future. Notice, please, Psalm 139:1-4, where King David says,

- 1** *O Lord, You have searched me and known me.*
- 2** *You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You understand my thought from afar.*
- 3** *You scrutinize my path and my lying down,
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.*
- 4** *Even before there is a word on my tongue,
Behold, O Lord, You know it all.*

So again, King David understands that God knows what he will say before he says it. This doesn't mean that God decides what David will say, but it means that God knows the future. From 1 John, we know that God knows everything, and here in Psalm 139, we find that **"everything"** seems to include the future.

We now move along to the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet who prophesied in the 700's BC, and we actually have three passages from Isaiah, starting with Isaiah 42:8-9 (p. 1135). And in this first passage, God describes himself. Notice, please, Isaiah 42:8-9, where God says,

- 8** *"I am the Lord, that is My name;
I will not give My glory to another,
Nor My praise to graven images.*
- 9** *"Behold, the former things have come to pass,
Now I declare new things;
Before they spring forth I proclaim them to you."*

So again, God knows what will happen in the future, and sometimes he actually tells us what he knows about the future. The next reference comes a few chapters later, in Isaiah 44:6-8 (p. 1139). And here, God continues to describe himself. He's explaining that he is a God who is worth following. Notice, please, Isaiah 44:6-8,

- 6** *"Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:
'I am the first and I am the last,
And there is no God besides Me.*
- 7** *'Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it;
Yes, let him recount it to Me in order,
From the time that I established the ancient nation.
And let them declare to them the things that are coming
And the events that are going to take place.*
- 8** *'Do not tremble and do not be afraid;
Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it?
And you are My witnesses.
Is there any God besides Me,
Or is there any other Rock? I know of none.'"*

Again, we find here that God knows what is coming, and sometimes he declares these events that will take place; sometimes he makes announcements concerning the future. The next reference is found in Isaiah 46:9-10 (p. 1144),

**9 “Remember the former things long past,
For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me,
10 Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things which have not been done,
Saying, ‘My purpose will be established,
And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’”**

An amazing passage! God is able to declare the end from the beginning! There are some other passages we could consider, but these seem to give a pretty good summary, that God knows the future.

However, there is one more passage I need to point out, specifically indicating that God knew, even before he made us, that human beings would sin. And this is the reference to Ephesians 3:8-11 (p. 1829). As we look at this passage, let’s focus in on the fact that God had a plan for our salvation from eternity. Ephesians 1:4 indicates that God knew this **“before the foundation of the world,”** and the apostle Paul gives a further explanation here. Notice, please, Ephesians 3:8-11, where Paul says,

⁸ To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; ¹⁰ so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What I hope we notice in this passage is that God’s **“eternal purpose”** was **“carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** In other words, God’s plan for our salvation was not some last-minute scramble, “Oh no! My creation sinned! Now what do I do?” That wasn’t it. But instead, God made us, knowing beforehand that we would sin, and his plan for saving us goes back even beyond **“the foundation of the world.”** His plan for our salvation is part of his **“eternal purpose.”** God knows the future.

B. There is a second Biblical principle that applies to this discussion, and that is, even though he knows the future, there is a sense in which GOD ACTS CONDITIONALLY, or we might say that God RESPONDS TO HUMAN BEHAVIOR. Sometimes, what God does depends on what we do, even though he knows the future.

The first passage up here comes from Jeremiah 18 (p. 1212). Jeremiah, of course, is written right around the time of the Babylonian Captivity, and in the years leading up to the captivity and the destruction of Jerusalem, God warns the people, over and over again. And God’s conditional behavior is summarized quite clearly in Jeremiah 18:6-10. He tells Jeremiah to go to the potter’s house to observe the potter creating a clay jar on the wheel, and in this context, notice the message – Jeremiah 18:6-10,

⁶ “Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?” declares the Lord. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; ⁸ if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. ⁹ Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; ¹⁰ if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.

In the next few verses, the message to the people is: God is preparing destruction, but it doesn’t have to be that way. God will hold back, if all of you will only repent. And a few verses later, as the people hear the message, they make plans to actually kill Jeremiah. So, the people are not changing. The point here is: God has every right to react to Israel’s behavior in the way he deems best, just as the potter has every right to go in different directions as he creates something on the wheel. And sometimes, those decisions are based on our behavior. God observes what we are doing, and he responds to our behavior in keeping with his promises. And so, it is because God keeps his promises that his behavior toward us is conditional. So, it might seem (from our point of view) that God is changing, but he is not changing; we are changing, and he is reacting to our behavior.

We have a few examples of this in the Bible. One of those is a brief reference in Psalm 53:2-3 (p. 906). What I hope we notice from this passage is that God observes human behavior. Even though he knows the future, he also observes what we do. We might even say that God learns based on observation. It’s one thing to know something is going to happen, but it’s something else to actually see it happen. I could illustrate with something that happens in my own life. Whenever we go to Laredo’s, I know what my wife will order: Combo #12, which includes something known as Chile Rellenos. She loves it, but it is a real pain to prepare that dish at home. We’ve done it a time or two, but it’s one of those things that’s just worth the effort sometimes. You have to roast the pepper over an open flame, scrape the skin, coat it in a whipped egg white mixture, fry it in oil, and so on. It takes forever. It destroys the kitchen. It’s not worth it. So, whenever we go to Laredo’s, I know that is what she will order. In some limited sense, I have some foreknowledge. I can predict the future. But then again, they don’t start making that dish until she actually orders it. I might impress you with my foreknowledge, “Hey, watch this! I know what she’s about to order.” But that isn’t confirmed until she actually makes the order. The behavior of the cooks is conditional not on my foreknowledge (I’m not making this happen), but the behavior of the kitchen is conditional on her behavior. And the point of this reference in Psalm 53 is that God observes human behavior. Notice, please, Psalm 53:2-3,

- 2 God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men
To see if there is anyone who understands,
Who seeks after God.***
- 3 Every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
There is no one who does good, not even one.***

So, even though God knows the future, he still learns something by watching us. We see something similar in Genesis 18 (p. 25), when the Lord observes the behavior of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even though he knows what he is about to do (in the sense of knowing the future), he reacts based on observation. Notice, please, Genesis 18:20-21, ***“And the Lord said, ‘The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.’”***

And there are a number of other references like this, situations where God seems to change his mind, based on human behavior. Even though he knows the future, it at least appears (from a human point of view) that God has changed. He has not changed (in that he is keeping his word), but he has changed (in that what he does is conditional on human behavior).

And really, we studied this last week with the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 (p. 32). We really didn't focus on this part of it, but in Genesis 22, God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham leaves home on the journey, they go up the mountain, Abraham ties up his son, he puts him on the altar, and finally, right as Abraham raises his hand with the knife, the angel of the Lord interrupts, and says (in verse 12), ***"Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."*** Notice: Even though God knows the future, only after Abraham does all of these things does God ***"know"*** that Abraham fears God. In a sense, he knew that previously, but now Abraham's faith has been demonstrated. But the point of all of this is that even though he knows the future, God's behavior is often conditional on our behavior.

II. **So, now that we've looked at these two ideas (that God knows the future and that in keeping with his promises God's actions are often conditional on human behavior), I want us to keep these two basic principles in mind as we apply these concepts to the TWO EXAMPLES in the request that led to today's lesson.**

A. **And we start with the reference to GENESIS 6 and God's response to sin in the world leading up to the flood – the reference here is Genesis 6 (p. 8).**

Let's look at the passage again – Genesis 6:5-8,

⁵ Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. ⁷ The Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them." ⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

So, the question is: How can God be ***"sorry,"*** how can God in some sense ***"regret"*** making mankind, if he really knew all along that mankind would eventually sin to the extent that they do here? And if he could foresee such a terrible thing happening, why didn't God just take a pass on creating man in the first place? Why did he create, knowing that he would get to a point where he would need to destroy?

Well, applying what we've learned up to this point, it seems to me that God could definitely see this coming, and it did make him ***"sorry"*** (or sad), but he prepared for it. He had a plan for this all along. This wasn't a surprise. This wasn't something that caught him off guard. But, it did make him very sad. He was ***"sorry,"*** as the NASB and a number of other translations put it. And this is where we need to discuss the translation of an interesting Hebrew word. The word can mean anything from "comfort" to "sorrow," depending on the context. But some of the older translations have given us a bit of grief here by translating the word as ***"repent."*** God ***"repented"*** of making mankind. What do most of us think of when we hear the word ***"repent"***? We think of somebody repenting of a sin, as if God sinned by making mankind, and now he is ***"repenting"*** of that mistake or sin. But that is not really what is going on here. Instead, God is ***"sorry."*** God ***"regrets"*** what has happened here.

Remember: Over and over again in Genesis 1, God says that his creation is **“good.”** But now his creation is not good at all. And this is not God’s fault.

So, yes, God could see this coming, but his feelings here are still conditional on what humanity has done. He is **“sorry.”** And this is clarified in the last part of verse 6, where we find that **“He was grieved in His heart.”** The point is: Even though God could see this coming, it still made him very sad.

Perhaps we can imagine a parent who needs to discipline a child. The child’s behavior (in a sense) dictates our response. But even though we need to do something, we as parents are still “sorry” that we need to do it. And if we had it to do over again, we would still have children, even though we knew all along that our children would have issues at some point in the future, and we would still follow through on the discipline, even though it makes us very sad. In some small way, perhaps that is what is going on here in Genesis 6.

B. And then, the second example was the situation with Saul in 1 SAMUEL 15 (p. 461).

Basically, God tells King Saul to wipe out the Amalekites, Saul disobeys, and that brings us to 1 Samuel 15:10-11, **“Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, ‘I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands.’ And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night.”** The same thought is repeated at the end of the chapter, in verse 35, **“Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.”**

So the question is: Why did God make Saul king in the first place, if he knew ahead of time that Saul would be a terrible king? That is obviously a deep question, but it seems to me that God was hoping for the best; however, God also created Saul with the freedom of choice. So, the regret God feels here is not regret in the sense that God is repenting for making a bad decision, but he’s regretting (or feeling sorrow) over the choices that Saul makes in this chapter. God wants to bless this man, but Saul refuses to cooperate.

In a sense, God was taking a risk by making Saul king, even though he already knew what the outcome would be. And this doesn’t even take into account the fact that God had already been working on Saul’s replacement. This also doesn’t take into account that all of this has created a teachable moment – not only at the time it first happened, but also for everybody else who reads about it, including all of us here this morning. We learn something from Saul’s failure here. Here we are, 3,000 years later, learning the importance of obedience.

By the way, as Saul gets mad at Samuel over this, Samuel has an interesting reply (down in verse 28), where he says, **“Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.”** And the phrase in the NASB **“change His mind”** goes back to the same word he used earlier, the word also translated as **“regret”** or **“sorrow.”** So, as I look at these two references – verse 10 where God regrets making Saul king and verse 28 where God does not regret (or change his mind on this), I think he’s addressing this from two points of view. On one hand, humanly speaking, God regrets making Saul king. He’s sad over this. But on the other hand, God is the same all through this in that God’s actions here are dictated by Saul’s obedience (or lack of it). God really doesn’t change his mind about King Saul. God wants him to obey and be blessed, but in the absence of obedience, God moves along (in the very next chapter) and finds somebody else.

I think this highlights the difference between God’s regret and our regret. Often, our regret comes when we do something where we never anticipated the consequences, “Oh no! What have I done!” That’s our regret. God’s

regret is that he does things, hoping we cooperate and obey, but he's sorry when we rebel against him. But he always gives us the chance, even though he knows how it will end.

Conclusion:

I don't know whether I've brought any clarity to this question. I hope I have. I hope we've learned something this morning. I hope I don't "regret" preaching this sermon. But there is something that's been on my mind as I've looked at these passages over the past week or two, and that is: I don't want to be somebody who causes God regret. I don't want to be like those people before the flood whose thoughts were only evil continually. Instead, I want to be like Noah. I want to find grace in the eyes of God. I don't want to be like King Saul who disobeyed a direct order from God. Instead, I want to be like Saul's replacement, King David, in that he was a man after God's own heart.

And as I looked into all of this, I came to a new appreciation of the text that Reid read for us just a bit ago from Ephesians 4 (p. 1831). Right at the end of that chapter, right in the middle of all of those warnings about anger, and stealing, and commands about the words that we speak, and reminders to be tender-hearted and forgiving, and all that, we have that unusual statement, where Paul says, ***"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."*** Do we see how that fits in here? Today we as Christians can ***"grieve the Holy Spirit of God."*** If we aren't serious about the Christian faith, if we don't control our anger, if we aren't careful with our words, and so on, we personally can cause God to grieve. And so, the encouragement this morning is this: Let's not cause God sorrow. Let's not cause God any more pain than we already have. Let's not make God feel regret about us.

The power of the gospel is that even if we have caused God some grief, he has already made plans for that. He anticipated this! He has already sent his only Son to die for our sins. In fact, God has made a promise, ***"He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned"*** (Mark 16:16). What God does next is up to us. If we can help in any way with your obedience to this good news, please pull me or one of the other shepherds aside after worship today. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, we invite you to let us know right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com