



# WHAT TO DO AFTER A BREAKUP: HANDLING PAIN AND REGRET BIBLICALLY

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## About the Series

The Greater Heritage *Ministry Helps* series of booklets teach important and relevant biblical topics in practical ways to help ministry professionals and believers grow spiritually and walk closer with Christ.

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and Regret Biblically**  
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**-Introduction-**

Dear reader,

If you're reading this article, you've probably had a relationship end. You may find yourself a bit confused or even somewhat disoriented, facing all sorts of questions, guilt, fears, and uncertainties. A path you once thought was fairly clear, now isn't even a path; and you're left with pain, doubt, and sorrow.

You need to know that God has not changed. He can't: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). He won't: "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you...are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). God describes himself in quite permanent language: a mighty rock and a massive fortress (Psalm 18:2), our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46), the everlasting God...the list goes on. What's the point? Because he is who he says he is, he calls you to trust him alone as Saviour and honor him alone as Lord. The Christ

who saves his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21) will never forsake them (Hebrews 13:5) in their sorrows.

This article began its life as a letter to a professing Christian brother attending a church I pastored. Specific identifying details are gone, but this is the core of the initial counsel I offered this young man, because it's the core of the counsel Scripture offers to everyone in this case. Now, he and his girlfriend had broken up rather suddenly over a struggle with sexual sin, and you'll see that #1 and #10 speak more specifically to that situation (there are only 10 points – relax!); but Scripture's wisdom, applied to post-breakup moments, speaks much further than merely that context. It's my prayer for you that these words will drive you to the Bible, and the God who makes himself known in it.

As the Westminster Catechism says, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." May Jesus be glorified in your life as you learn to walk this out before him, my friend.

A fellow sinner still learning to look to Jesus,

Reagan

Dear brother,

I wanted to write to you after we spoke at church on Sunday. One of the elders mentioned that you abstained today from the Lord's Supper due to your breakup with \_\_\_\_\_ and some of the struggles, confusion, and issues surrounding it. Hopefully this letter will be helpful and encouraging for you, and provide biblical advice and wisdom for walking forward faithfully from here. I sincerely pray these thoughts will be received in the spirit in which they're offered: my intent as your pastor is only ever to help you grow strong in the Lord. You matter so much to me. I want to see you continue growing in Christ, and learning to be well-pleasing to him in all things. God has given you a tremendous mind and a heart to honor Jesus, and I want to see your full faculties leveraged for building up Christ's kingdom and blessing his people!

These thoughts aren't in any particular order; they simply reflect the nature of some of my prayers for you, and some counsel from God's Word which I believe will prove helpful as you walk through these days.

-I-

***Be honest about how sin has affected this situation.***

First, thank you for your honesty with me. I know that sexual sin is always a very personal struggle, and is never easy to confess. Scripture is plain that “the one who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and renounces them shall find mercy” (Proverbs 28:13). Concealing sin can take many forms – though simply hiding it, or failing to confess it to a brother who will pray for you (James 5:16) are probably the most common ways we do it. Blame-shifting, making excuses, or minimizing it, lying about its extent or true nature, or rationalizing the sin are some other ways we attempt to conceal our sins; these often happen after the fact, sometimes even after an initial confession like you made Sunday.

I strongly encourage you to guard yourself against such “secondary assaults” and to deal plainly with both the Lord and your ex-girlfriend now, and others if those temptations come again later. Accountability to your elders and a trusted brother in Christ now and in the future will be an important part of growth in godliness in this matter. Richard Baxter once wrote<sup>1</sup> that “a free confession [of sin] is a condition of a full remission,” and as Charles Spurgeon taught<sup>2</sup> from Psalm 51, when

Christians “deal seriously with our sin, God will deal gently with us.” Satan’s temptation is to be less-than-truthful with both our indwelling sin and our outward sins; and I pray that you’ll not fall into such a trap. Be on guard!

-2-

***Consider how your words have contributed  
to this moment.***

Now, this next part is not to kick you while you’re down, but to be direct with you about a pattern in your life. My brother, you have “the gift of gab” – you are able to speak to many people about many things with relative ease, and especially the things of God. This is good; you often tell me of how you love to read the Scriptures and study theology so that you understand “the truth as it is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21) and are better able to tell others about him, and that’s a tremendous encouragement to me! But, because I know you, I’ve also observed and spoken to you before concerning your habit of speaking too quickly, too sharply, too much, and often with exaggeration or far too much finality (drawing needless lines in the sand). This is sinful speech.

The Bible calls us to be “quick to listen and slow to speak” (James 1:19). Why? Because “where words are many,



transgression is not lacking” (Proverbs 10:19). Sinful speech is a familiar struggle to every Christian; James 3:1-12 provides sobering insight in this respect and merits your careful consideration. Scripture calls us instead to the self-control of godly speech which edifies its hearers (Ephesians 4:29) – words that edify rather than vilify and build up rather than tear down, gracious words reflecting our gracious Lord. As Paul noted a few verses earlier in that chapter (v. 15), we are to “speak truth, in love.”

Sinful speech shreds souls. Gracious speech heals souls (Proverbs 12:18). Scripture teaches that relationships die with impatient, unkind, impossible, overmuch, or untrue speech, but they thrive and glorify God with patient, kind, helpful, measured, true words. It’s true in the church, the office, the home – and the relationship. I encourage you to examine your words to \_\_\_\_\_ carefully in this respect.

-3-

***Be careful to guard your heart.***

Scripture places great weight on its directive to “guard your heart” (Proverbs 4:23). We’ve texted concerning this several times, and wisdom dictates that we speak to it a bit more here. As I said then, guarding your heart (or as an older translation renders it, “keeping the heart”) is not fundamentally

disentangling your emotions, but carefully watching over your life and soul. Choices made, words spoken, company kept, concepts cherished or approved, temptations entertained or indulged, worldviews adopted and applied, and so forth are all ways that the content of your heart – what Jesus says you really think and believe is true – shows itself (Luke 6:45). In each of these scenarios, your heart makes a conscious decision to worship the living God as its treasure, or to worship self. Every act of sin is an act of worship. The worship of self is the antithesis of the worship of God, as you well know; and selfishness, self-love, and self-worship are ultimately at the root of all sin.

As Scripture presents it, guarding the heart has almost nothing to do with any modern romantic concept, and nearly everything to do with cultivating your heart's affection, devotion, and obedience to God. To keep your heart, especially in these days, you must be very intentional in weeding out anything which would compete with the majesty and worthiness of Christ. It means you keep a close watch – more closely than ever before, because you've progressed in Christ further than you have before. You watch your outward and inward life carefully, to live before God with integrity (Proverbs 23:7). A little humiliation is far better than wandering from the Christ who has loved you so faithfully. Direct your heart to him,

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again and again. Meditate on Scripture as never before. Memorize Scripture so that you're better equipped to wage this war. And watch carefully that you not fall into the counsel of the ungodly, or scoffers, or scorners – those who ultimately mock the gospel you hold dear (Psalm 1).

I'm jealous for you in this with a godly jealousy, as the New Testament says (2 Corinthians 11:2) – I want to see you continue growing in the Lord as you have been, not falling into folly. And this moment is very much a deciding point for you. Don't miss that, brother. How you respond now will set a precedent for future trials, triumphs, temptations, relationships, and so forth.

Perhaps, as you mentioned, you did somehow “dodge a bullet” in the relationship ending; I can't really speak to that because you knew her far better than I ever did. But in this season, you must guard your heart carefully, and direct it again and again to Christ, who is your life (Colossians 3:1-14; Hebrews 12). You know I love reading the dead guys; one of my favorites, John Flavel, wrote<sup>3</sup> a little book entitled “Keeping the Heart” which would be very helpful to you right now as you learn how to guard yours. I commend it to you.

-4-

***Be alert as to your thoughts.***

Be careful that you don't fall into the two ditches presently lining your road. On one side is the ditch of anger, resentment, slander, and *ad hominem*<sup>4</sup> thoughts and talk against your ex-girlfriend, or her family, friends, problems, and so forth. Sinful speech slides you quickly into this ditch, which often comes through what is really self-justification, and it ultimately constitutes a violation of the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment. Questions 81-83 in our catechism, with their Scripture references, would be very fruitful points of consideration and prayer to help you avoid this first ditch.<sup>5</sup> Another danger lies in the ditch across the road: minimizing, belittling, and distancing yourself from her memory in spite. This sort of thing reeks of bitterness, a deadly poison (Hebrews 12:15). It runs the risk of treating lightly or despising (Hebrews 12:5-6) this hardship which is actually a gift of God's grace. This ditch is essentially kicking against God's merciful providence in exposing your sin, and chastening and humbling you; Scripture calls this evidence of sonship.

You see, God always uses the pain in our lives in at least two ways. First, he reveals the hidden, ugly places in our hearts through it. Second, he drives us to the Cross to depend on his grace. This is a reason for self-examination, contrition,

repentance, and fresh resolve to walk forward in glorifying God. You've expressed to me several times your desire for a godly wife and a family of your own. To desire godly marriage is an honorable thing. So: do the hard work now of tending your soul, and you'll be better prepared for when God brings her. Endure the hardship as discipline; embrace (and even be thankful!) that God is training you by it; and look eagerly for the final fruit of peace and righteousness that God intends for you through it. Hebrews 12:6-14 will prove fertile soil for you to study closely, memorize, and reflect on right now.

-5-

***Battle bitterness and sinful anger.***

Yours wouldn't be the first relationship to hit a rocky patch and later begin again. I encourage you – don't say, do, feed, or suggest things/thoughts/attitudes toward \_\_\_\_\_ or her family and friends which you'll later regret. Even if you don't get back together, at bare minimum you don't want to have nurtured anything even approaching bitterness or sinful anger toward a sister in Christ, especially one who was dear to you (even if only briefly). Hebrews 12:15 warns that bitterness roots in, springs up, makes trouble, and defiles many. Heed that warning carefully.

One further thought on this head: you don't want to develop the habit of harboring bitter or resentful thoughts toward women, but especially toward one(s) you love. Speaking wicked, unkind, unloving words out of your pain, shame, or anger is a sinful pattern which roots itself deeply across your whole life with breathtaking speed. I've counseled many husbands who developed the habit of hard, hostile words toward their wives, and it's an incredibly difficult pattern to break. It not only violates the 6th Commandment (Exodus 20:13; Matthew 5:21-24), but often throws in the 9th Commandment as well. Sin compounds; and I know you want to be godly. Flee this youthful (read: spiritually immature) desire, and pursue godliness. It'll be difficult, and it'll be worth it down the road.

-6-

***Be vigilant about your mind's intake and your soul's diet.***

I touched on this in passing earlier, but want to speak to it a bit more here. Be careful not to succumb to the triviality of unwise or ungodly company, leisure, reading, podcasts, or entertainment. 1 Corinthians 15:33 is in the Bible for a reason. Post-breakup, many young men comfort themselves (read: they self-medicate) with deep dives into pornography, politics, physical pursuits (think weight loss/sports/workouts/outdoors obsessions), or just popping off their mouths at or about whoever or whatever they feel like. None of these things glorify

God, and several directly defy him. All of them indicate an unguarded heart, and expose your attention as being fixed somewhere besides Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). Purpose to redeem the time God gives you, because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:16) – you’re in a battle, brother. Your path in this world lies behind enemy lines, you walk every moment in occupied territory, and your adversary hates your soul. Preach to yourself that this world and its lusts are passing away (1 John 2:17), but Jesus is precious (1 Peter 2:7). Remind yourself that you’re ultimately preparing for the life to come – and order your steps, speech, spare time, and Scripture intake accordingly.

You value biblical roles for men and women, brother, and rightly so. Scripture teaches them and requires them of us in our lives (Ephesians 5:22-33). I urge you, then, to consider this: true manhood consists surprisingly little in what you say (talk is cheap...Proverbs 18:2 says fools major on it) and almost entirely in what you do. Resolve to be such a man that when you speak, your words are worthwhile, biblical, and give grace to your hearers (Jeremiah 1:5-9; Ephesians 4:29). Such an approach will take your mind, lips, and attitude to a place where God will be exalted and your life well-spent, for his name’s sake. Study carefully the life of Christ in this matter, and follow in his footsteps.

In pursuing this point, make sure you're faithful in weekly Lord's Day worship. You need the means of grace more than you need anything else. Singing praise lifts your heart to God. Hearing Law and Gospel exposes your sin and restores your soul. Receiving the public reading of Scripture renews your mind. Serving others reminds you of how Jesus served you in his sufferings, death, and resurrection. Praying with the saints teaches you dependence upon the Lord. Confessing your sin, partaking of the Lord's Table, and sitting under faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word confronts your sin, counsels your struggles, comforts your soul, calms your fears, conforms you to Christ, and showcases infinite, almost indescribable mercies given to believers by the blood of the Cross. Learn to "call the Sabbath a delight" (Isaiah 58:13), start ordering your schedule around it weekly, and watch God strengthen you by grace.

-7-

***Guard against idolatry in all its forms.***

This next point is brief, but important: guard yourself against the temptation of idolatry (breaking the 1st Commandment) in your longing for another relationship. I know how much you want to marry; and that's a holy thing, a desire which can bring great honor to God. Be careful that you keep the desire for a wife – a companion, a lover, a friend, one to love and honor –



as a holy desire, and one which you consciously aim to keep subject to God's primacy, providence, wisdom, and timing. No woman is perfect. They all have emotional strengths and weaknesses of some sort; they all have a history of sins they've committed and sins committed against them; they all have their own particular set of problems, struggles, fears, mistakes, regrets, friends, besetting sins, family issues...and so do you. And yet, here's the wisdom of God: "he who finds a wife finds a good thing" (Proverbs 18:22). God unites one sinner to another in order to sanctify them both, as they point one another to the Cross, learn to walk in forgiveness, and grow in patience (the old word used there is "longsuffering"). This is the heart and soul of the one-flesh union (Genesis 2:24).

You want a wife, one of God's greatest blessings, and that is honorable. I encourage you here: fight idolatrous desire, with desiring *more*. Desire more to glorify your God, than to gratify your longings. Desire more to be a blessing and grace to her, than to receive blessing and grace through her. Desire more to point her to Christ daily and to bind up the wounds of her sins by the Word, than you even desire her nearness. Desire to wash her with the pure water of the Word, to help her glorify God even more than she satisfies you. That's how you begin to combat the many forms of this subtle idolatry which will try to crouch at your door (Genesis 4:7). As an encouraging side note,

I haven't noticed you exhibiting idolatrous desire here, but it's typically a strong temptation post-breakup, and worth mentioning in case it does start to present an issue.

-8-

***Submit yourself to the wise providence of God.***

You may face subtle or strong temptations toward self-pity. Battle them by “looking to Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2). He endured both physical and emotional pain in his suffering for our salvation at the Cross. Hebrews 12 describes it as feeling like “shame” (v. 2) and facing rejection to the point of “hostility against himself” (v. 3). I've seen that you're a fellow who isn't ruled by his emotions, but self-pity can tempt even the strongest of men into its snare. Job learned that after an incredibly painful season of life (Job 2:11-3:1).

God's Word encourages us that there is still hope for the Christian, even while facing the most difficult providences. Peter instructed Christians – those “who suffer according to God's will,” who find themselves facing adverse circumstances for the sake of the gospel – to “entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Peter 4:19). Now, he's talking to people who are being persecuted; but we can glean an important insight from this passage. The Lord is sovereign over your life; he is faithful in how he deals with you, even if his

providences bring pain or displeasure to you; he can be trusted because he is faithful; and you, in faith, must learn to entrust yourself to him wholeheartedly and continue to obey his Word.

Why? Because he is the one who both hears your prayers and works all things for your ultimate good – which is to be conformed to his image and able to glorify him (Psalm 57:2; Romans 8:28-29). He is the one who governs your days, with all their details (Psalm 139:16); he governs history itself, including yours (Ephesians 1:11). These biblical realities renew your mind, reset your heart, reorient your perspective, and put wind in your sails. So put the sin of self-pity to death and strengthen your trust in God’s all-wise dealings with you by submitting to his mighty hand (James 4:7). Hope comes through these truths.

-9-

***Focus on cultivating godly friendships.***

Why? It’s frequently tempting to withdraw relationally, wallow in self-pity, or waste time in fantasizing about who “the next one” may be. Scripture leaves no room for any of these choices. Instead, the Bible urges you to press in to developing godly friendships, and to growing as a friend yourself. It’s easy to think, “I need good friends around me to support me and encourage me right now,” and that’s true. Your character is deeply influenced and your comfort is greatly enhanced by your

companions (1 Corinthians 15:33; Proverbs 27:9). But Scripture presents friendship as a two-way street. Frequently, romantic relationships fail because the basics of Christian friendship are overlooked. Grow as a friend – not merely so you’ll be a better potential mate, but so you learn how to think more highly of others more than yourself (Romans 12:10; Philippians 2:3), how to encourage someone (Hebrews 3:13 and 10:24; 1 Thessalonians 5:14), how to bear someone’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), how to listen well (James 1:19), how to pray for others (Colossians 4:12)...you get the idea.

An excellent place to begin considering prayerfully how the Bible instructs you to grow as a friend is by studying the “one anothers” of the New Testament. Anywhere you find “encourage *one another*,” “be kind to *one another*,” etc., begin to look up what else the Bible says about that given duty to others (in particular, Proverbs offers truckloads of wisdom and perspective to engage on this subject). Jesus requires these matters of every Christian toward other saints, but they’re habitually overlooked or set aside as inconvenient.

Godly friendship’s secret is *service in love*: “Serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13) – “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-

13). Deal with others as Jesus has dealt with you, not in a bare, detached, transactional way (if they're nice, you're nice), but in genuine loving service. Learn how to lay down your life for another because you love them, like Jesus did for his people (Ephesians 5:25; see also 1 Thessalonians 2:8).

It's a process of growth in grace, and a process you won't regret. Serve others in love as unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23-24), for his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31).

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***Consider an apology letter.***

Finally, consider prayerfully that an apology letter to your ex-girlfriend may well be in order. If you write this note, it's not asking her to get back together, nor do you defend yourself or accuse her. There's no place for language like "It's your fault we had \_\_\_\_\_ problem," or "If you'd done/said/not done/not said \_\_\_\_\_, we wouldn't have faced \_\_\_\_\_," or other subtle manipulative jabs. These are sinful speech, precisely the sort of sentences and thoughts which don't belong in this letter - or in Christian relationships in general. If you write this note, I encourage you to employ a very humble, plain, tactful, and truthful tone - admitting and owning where you've failed to act in godliness toward her as a Christian brother. 1

Timothy 5:2 and Titus 2:6 contain key principles which should guide your thinking, prayers, and apology here. Acknowledge any sin against both God and her (Psalm 51:4), and genuinely ask for her forgiveness. The intent is reconciling any wrongs with a sister, not restoring romantic standing. Whether or not the relationship resumes is largely irrelevant; what's most important here is that you've sought to honor the Lord as holy, and her as one with whom you'll spend eternity, though probably not this life.

While you're not "using" this letter or her, you'll find it's good practice for if you do have a wife one day. 1 Peter 3:7, in speaking of women as "weaker vessels," utterly forbids us men from despising them, dishonoring them, disparaging them, or just plain dropping them and walking away with no attempt at seeking forgiveness or making due reparation – especially for those who are "fellow heirs of the grace of life." Scripture here requires Christian men to "show them honor," not in a condescending "I'm-more-honorable-than-you," "I'm-better-than-that" tone, or "I'm-being-the-bigger-person" kind of way, but in the manner and mindset of a servant: with humility and seeking to serve them for their good, that she might be built up in Jesus. That's acting in grace, whether or not it's reciprocated. Dishonoring a sister in Christ now is excellent practice for

searing your conscience (1 Timothy 4:2) toward your wife one day; and I know that's neither your intent nor desire here.

While much more could be said, this has been a long letter, so I'll close here: I love you, my brother, and am jealous that Christ be honored in your life! If I didn't care, I wouldn't write. But I do care. 1 Peter 5:5-11 warns that Satan prowls about us, wanting to devour us. The Holy Spirit calls us to "resist him, standing firm in the faith." My prayer for you is just that – that you grow in Christ so that you show yourself to be that godly man, one who is found faithful in this matter. I am so thankful for you! Know that I'm praying for you daily, and I'm here if I can help. You're not alone!

Grace to you.

—Pastor Reagan

## References

<sup>1</sup> Richard Baxter (1615-1691), *The Reformed Pastor*, p. 3. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), *The Treasury of David*, I.402. Zondervan, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> John Flavel (c.1627-1691), *Keeping the Heart*. Reprinted by Christian Heritage Books, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Latin: 'against the man.' Here, it means mentally or verbally attacking the person, while failing to consider engage actual issues and problems faced in a prayerful, godly, biblical way.

<sup>5</sup> *The Baptist Catechism*, a lightly edited version of *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, is a document birthed out of the heart of seventeenth-century English Puritanism. In a helpful Q&A format, it instructs Christians on how to understand and approach the Bible's teaching on each major point of theology, then addresses how Christians must live to honor and please God. Don't let the older language throw you off here; the point being made is that you must deal truthfully, even (especially?) in very personal matters. The Lord whose name is truth (John 14:6; Revelation 19:11), whose word is truth (John 17:17; Psalm 119:160), whose very being is truth personified (Ephesians 4:21), requires us to be people marked by his truth in all things (Ephesians 4:25, 29).

**#81. Q.** Which is the ninth commandment? **A.** The ninth commandment is, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Exodus 20:16).

**#82. Q.** What is required in the ninth commandment? **A.** The ninth commandment requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man (Zechariah 8:16), and of our own neighbour's good name (John 5:12), especially in witnessbearing (Proverbs 14:5, 25).

**#83. Q.** What is forbidden in the ninth commandment? **A.** The ninth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever is prejudicial to the truth, or injurious to our own or our neighbour's good name (1Samuel 17:28; Leviticus 19:16; Psalm 15:2-3).



## ***About The Greater Heritage***



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