

Almost all of us regret some things we have done or didn't do because they hurt someone. Sometimes the very best decision we could possibly have made turned out to be the wrong decision, but we didn't realize it until later. Other times we knowingly chose what was wrong and forever injured someone.

It's hard to know what the specific injury is that Zechariah the prophet reports in chapter 12:10-11. He doesn't give much information. All we know is that someone has been pierced or stabbed, and that the action was wrong. More than one person perpetrated the crime, attacking an innocent victim. God speaks a surprising prophecy through Zechariah. God does not say, "I will punish the attackers." Instead, God says that they shall look on the one they have pierced, "and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son, and they shall grieve over him as one grieves over a firstborn." So the prophecy is that the people who committed the crime will experience regret. God says, "I will pour out on the house of David . . . a spirit of grace and petition." Whenever any of us feels regret, it is a sign of grace.

In our culture, victims of crimes usually want the perpetrator punished, and that's important. But some churches and social organizations have promoted a further approach called "restorative justice," in which perpetrators meet their victims, and everyone tries to repair the damage together. Usually the family of the criminal is aching, not just the victim's family. Some victims have stood above their personal hurt to address a broader need, to go to the roots of crime and stop it in its tracks. A scripture passage like this leads you to believe that God is not satisfied with punishment; God wants the conversion of the sinner. It's a controversial position. If we are the victim, we might disagree, but if we are the sinner, we think it's a good idea: we'll choose conversion over punishment any day. The real challenge comes when we are the victim – to see the resolution of the problem through God's eyes, to seek a justice that restores, not merely one that punishes.

One verse from this reading reappears late in the gospel of John. You are very familiar with this passage. After Jesus dies on the cross, John says, "one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out." Then John says, "this happened so that the Scripture passage might be fulfilled: . . . 'They will look upon him whom they have pierced.'" John sees in the death of Jesus the fulfillment of this prophecy from Zechariah: the people responsible for piercing the innocent victim later regret what they have done. They receive a spirit of grace and petition. They mourn over the victim of their own violence. They repent and are healed.

Whenever we look at a crucifix, our eyes may be drawn to the wound in the side of Christ. That wound is not just a sign of his suffering. That wound is a sign of his redeeming. It proclaims that no matter what sin we have committed or that someone committed against us, Jesus died not so much that sinners would be punished, but that they would have a conversion of heart. We are called to pray that way for those who offend us.

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