

Hi, I'm Clay Morgan, and I write and speak about the meaning we can find in our shared culture and history. I've been coming to Catalyst now since I moved from Pittsburgh to Dallas in January. I've enjoyed getting to know many of you this year and am excited to get to talk about ghosts today.

I'm a writer by trade, and one of the things I've been working on for a couple years is research about why we're fascinated by paranormal activity and what it means to be haunted.

So far I've done things like going out with a team of ghost hunters, spending an afternoon with an exorcist, and exploring an abandoned asylum. I also stayed overnight in the Mansfield Reformatory [2 Pics of prison], a famous prison in Ohio which closed down in 1990. In addition to being where they filmed the movie Shawshank Redemption [3 Clay at Desk], it's also considered one of the most haunted places in America. All through the night, I walked around with a couple of interesting guys, including a 6'8 dude named Josh [4 Clay's Tall Buddy] who happened to be a professional bodyguard who mostly protected Madonna and her family at that time.

We don't really talk about ghosts in church, at least not in the spooky specter way. They're too creepy or just plain crazy or whatever. Then again, maybe I'm not the only one who got confused as a child by adults who told me "there's no such thing as ghosts... except also we believe in a Holy Ghost."

But maybe you're one of the people who *do* believe that something strange may be afoot beyond this visible realm. It seems like a lot more of us believe than we want to say in public. [5 Infographic]

- A Huffington Post poll from a couple years back asked respondents, "Do you believe in ghosts, or that the spirits of dead people can come back in certain places and situations?"
 - 45% of adult responders affirmed their belief in ghosts by that definition. Almost half.
- A CBS poll showed as many as 48% of people answering "Yes" when asked, "Do you believe in ghosts?"
- *The Pew Forum found that roughly 3 in 10 people have felt in contact with someone who was decidedly in the demographic of dead.
 - This 2009 research showed how Americans claiming to interact with a ghost had *doubled* since the mid-1990s.

What has caused so many people to claim supernatural experiences? Why are we fascinated by ghosts?

[6 Ghosts] Ghost stories are about what HAUNTS us. They're about the past. To me, they connect strongly with regret.

I think of ghost tales as time travel stories. Someone usually has died with unresolved business here on earth. Maybe they want revenge or to express love for someone. The spirit needs to give or receive a critical message. We're drawn in by the opportunity to alter reality, to reach back into our troubled pasts and rewrite happy endings where only pain and failure sit on the pages of history. In them, we get to play God to some extent. Ghost stories are cathartic. So, we spend loads of cash on them, endorsing the paranormal at the box office with dollars by the billions.

That may sound a little out there, but after spending the past couple years traveling around in search of America's most haunted places, they're all about painful parts of our past. Prisons, asylums, battlefields, scenes of great injustice... Our nation shares ghost stories as a way to grapple with the guilt of our past sins. Times when the stronger among us abused our power to harm others.

Some of us aren't just haunted by regrets, though. We can also be haunted by GOOD things (glory days). Some of us find ourselves stuck in the past, longing for better times.

But maybe you're not buying all this ghost stories as time travel business. Maybe you aren't sure if regrets are ghosts or not. Let me tell you one of mine.

I made a friend named Mike on the first day I ever arrived at college. Our ex-girlfriends from high school ended up sharing a dorm room, so just like that we were buddies by our first supper. The guy was a stud, the kind of guy who would've been cast as a lead in all these teenage trilogy movies. He won wrestling championships in his downtime. You can't miss a big laugh or wild streak like his.

We were supposed to be roommates 2nd semester, but he didn't show up until classes had already begun. He said he'd just been in a brawl with his dad and wouldn't be in college anymore. But by year 2 he was back in school and living at my off campus apartment. We were young and got into more trouble than we should have.

I never talked about my faith back then. Probably, I was still trying to figure out what my faith actually was. But I hid those spiritual things about me, probably to be cool since I was obsessed with people liking me. So during those times when I had a chance to speak love and truth, I didn't. I was self-focused and never spoke life-giving things into Mike's life, even when he asked me to. There were plenty of opportunities.

I stopped living on campus, so our daily coexistence ended, but we stayed in touch and both returned to the same college for grad school. He mellowed over the years but always greeted me with a smile, but he seemed tired.

Then one day I heard the terrible news. During a confused and terrible night, Mike had apparently shot and killed himself. The news broke me. I went to the cemetery where my grandma had been buried not too much earlier. I sobbed at her grave and felt more than pain for a lost friend. I felt like a failure because I had never tried to give Mike hope. I had participated in his death.

In the years that followed, I became a teacher at a few colleges. Mike's ghost haunted me. No matter how many birthdays I celebrated, I always saw his face in those classrooms when I looked out at my students faces. Mike was always there, forever 25 years old.

[7 **Regret image**] Our regrets often have the power to define our present.

- I bet I'm not the only person here who laments missed opportunities to love others.
- ...who has failed in a relationship because of a past one.
- Or maybe some of you insisted you would never be like your parents, but then...
- Or what about the chances we don't take and moments we don't make because, well, that last time we tried...

The good news for us today is that we can find freedom from the things that haunt us.

You don't have to just take my word for it. Turns out there are even stories of hauntings in the bible. Like literal ghost stories. [**Scripture Slide**] Let's check out one of them in 1 Samuel 28:7-20. If you grabbed a bible from the back it's on p. 206, and feel free to keep that as a gift.

Saul was Israel's first king. You can read about his fascinating, tragic life in 1 Samuel, but here are a couple highlights. The king's main job was to lead the army, so his qualifications were that he was the biggest dude around (kind of like Josh in the haunted prison). But Saul was reluctant to the call and even tried to hide when the people cheered for his coronation.

Early in his reign, Saul's country came up against a literal giant named Goliath, and all of a sudden he wasn't the biggest guy anymore. He'd never felt like a king, but up to this point, at least he'd been big enough, tough enough to defend his crown... however reluctantly. Now, he couldn't even do that. There was someone bigger and tougher and Saul had to know it wouldn't

end well. And you know that Saul didn't save the day, because no one's ever heard the story of Saul and Goliath. Over and over he displays this crushing sense of inadequacy.

God chose Saul, but he could never believe that. Saul was haunted by a sense of inadequacy. Fortunately, Saul had a crutch - the prophet Samuel. Samuel constantly reassured Saul that he was doing God's will, that he was God's chosen King. For example, Samuel told Saul to rid Israel of witchcraft, and so the king did. Saul's insecurity was countered by constant reassurances from Samuel. As long as he had Samuel around to tell him everything would be okay, he managed. Samuel was like a crutch for Saul to lean on. But on eve of battle, Samuel died.

By time we get to our ghost story, Saul doesn't believe in himself, and he doesn't have Samuel to reassure him that God's plan is the right plan for this battle. He's paralyzed by fear of his own inadequacy, and there's no one to reassure him. Let's read together, beginning in verse 7.

7 Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her." "There is one in Endor," they said. 8 So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name." 9 But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?" 10 Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As surely as the Lord lives, you will not be punished for this." 11 Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?"

"Bring up Samuel," he said. 12 When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" 13 The king said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" The woman said, "I see a ghostly figure[a] coming up out of the earth." 14 "What does he look like?" he asked. "An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.

15 Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" "I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has departed from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do." 16 Samuel said, "Why do you consult me, now that the Lord has departed from you and become your enemy? 17 The Lord has done what he predicted through me. The Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors—to David. 18 Because you did not obey the Lord or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the Lord has done this to you today. 19 The Lord will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines." 20 Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear

because of Samuel's words. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and all that night.

You might be surprised to hear such a wild ghost story from the bible. It's really there though. It appears that the ghost of Samuel really appeared. Even terrified the witch.

Saul was haunted by a sense of never being good enough. No matter what God himself said about Saul, he couldn't believe it. His constant sense of inadequacy led him to violate God's commands. And it cost him his life.

The end came shortly after his encounter with the witch. The Philistine army closed in on him, killing his three sons, and wounding him critically with arrows. Defeated and out of options, Saul took his own life on Mount Gilboa. When we can't resolve our hauntings, death is the result.

Here's what's at stake in this conversation for us: Our personal ghosts and past failures will lead us down to disaster if we succumb to them. They drag us down. Regrets and the things that haunt us define our present. So what do we do? Let's look at another Saul who found healing from his regrets.

You might know Saul #2 better by his Greek name, Paul, which means "little" or "short." But his Hebrew name was Saul. This Saul didn't suffer from the same crippling inadequacy as the doomed king, but he did have a lot of regrets. Before turning to God he had persecuted the church and even killed Christians. Much of the New Testament is his letters where he often talks about how heartbroken he is for the terrible things he had done.

We can read one of his letters called Philippians (p.819 from the back), which is a joyful message to his friends. Saul wrote it while in prison, but even there he felt thankful for people he had poured himself into in life-giving ways.

Phil. 3:3b-14 (MSG)

We couldn't carry this off by our own efforts, and we know it—even though we can list what many might think are impressive credentials. You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book.

⁷⁻⁹ The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so

that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—*God's* righteousness.

¹⁰⁻¹¹ I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

¹²⁻¹⁴ I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus.

(S)Paul says, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal..." So what is behind that (S)Paul has to forget? His past credentials include both glory and regret. He's been both murderer and martyr. But he's forgetting all of it, good and bad. In fact, he has some pretty strong language for us.

Did you hear what he compares all the stuff from our past to? Dog dung. He uses a word that means the same thing and we don't say in church. [8 Romy] I know all about this because I have a dog named Romy. Cute, right? But there's an ugly side to dog ownership. I walk him twice a day, poo bags always ready to go [maybe hold up one, preferably unused, bag].

(S)Paul is telling us here that our past regrets are like dog poo. Bag it up and trash it. That's where those things belong. And not just the bad stuff, but even some past glory days that we hold onto instead of living in the here and now. Living everyday with the past out in front of you would be like me setting out all my dog's poo bags on display in my house. That would be disgusting. It would fester and contaminate my life and drive others away. But that's exactly what many of us do with the past.

We carry it around with us. It's always right there, haunting our present. We know it's there but we can't let go. Or won't. Some of us don't think we are able to let go of our past regrets. We don't know if we can get rid of that baggage. We think we deserve to carry it around. That it's a permanent condition. (S)Paul describes his life as being in a race. But have you ever tried to run with luggage?

We think our best days are behind us, that our future is destined to disappoint. But our future isn't about what we've done at all. What matters is what God has done in us. God has set us free from the past, from regret. We have a choice to NOT look back, and to instead focus on what's ahead. Allowing the past to dominate our lives isn't just bad practice, it's disobedience to God.

He hates when we carry around our poo! The reason God calls us to do this is because it kills us not to. He calls us onward and upward, not backward to where all our ghosts live.

Now does that mean we should never celebrate anything from our past? Or that we should disregard everything that's ever happened to us? I don't think so. God can redeem our pasts as well...

I told you about my friend Mike, who wasn't able to let go of his baggage, and it cost him his life. Now, I was never visited by Mike's ghost but was haunted by it nonetheless. In a decade as a college teacher, I stared out at students for years. I often saw Mike there. In my mind, he's always 25 years old.

A few years ago, I was teaching when a young student captured my attention. He was going through tough times. One day, he got up in the middle of class and left. I found him nervously pacing the hallway. He showed me a text message from someone who said they were on campus, had a gun, and were coming for him. I took him in my office and we waited for the police together. The threat went unrealized, but we began some serious conversations.

He shared with me some painful stories of depression and how he had considered and researched ways to take his own life. I asked him if he thought God could be real and personal. Over the next few weeks he opened up and felt the love of God in a real way he had never known. His life didn't get instantly easy and perfect, but he chose to hold onto it because he stopped looking backwards and began looking upwards.

A young man chose life, and God allowed me to be instrumental in that decision. The Clay who taught in those classrooms was not the same Clay who Mike knew.

Whatever pain we've endured, Jesus shares in that with us.

[9 Ghost with Question Mark]What is in your past that haunts you? What should you be counting as loss?

We each have a choice to make. A lot of us have been carrying around stuff that God is calling us to let go of it. It's not taking you anywhere good. It's dragging you down.

Ghosts trap us in the past. We can't step forward into the life God is calling us to if we are constantly looking backwards. He is commanding us, inviting us, upward into the light.

What if we stopped being bound by the past? What if we were free of regret? What if we weren't bringing baggage into our future relationships? Imagine if we were a people who find freedom and healing by leaving behind that which haunts us and focusing on what God is doing in us, for us.

It may take some time to get there, but we have choice. We don't have to be controlled by our past. God offers healing from what haunts us.

Prayer of examine:

1. When in the last week did I live in freedom from my past?
2. When in the last week were my actions haunted by regrets or successes in my past?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to live haunted by my past?
4. How can I choose to leave my past behind me this week?