

It was a gorgeous day, and the man had some time to kill, so he pulled into the parking lot at a local trailhead and started off on an impromptu hike. He couldn't get over the fact that there was hardly a soul on the trail. With blue skies above and a gentle breeze singing in the trees, he set out at a brisk pace, taking deep breaths of the fresh air. It was a great day to be outdoors.

A half hour in, the man came to what looked like a fork in the trail. It wasn't marked, but the path that angled off to the right looked well traveled, and definitely looked more interesting than the groomed, pea gravel trail he had been on. He decided to take the path to the right, figuring he could always turn around if things didn't work out. He walked on. After a few minutes he came to a spot on the trail where a sign had once been posted. He could tell because there was a hole in the middle of the path, and the sign was laying on the ground, parallel to the path. The sign was facing up, and was still legible. It read, “You are now leaving the grounds of the Park. Beyond this sign is private property. Trespassers will be prosecuted.” That message seemed pretty clear, but what did it mean that the sign was out of place? Was this really the boundary? The path continued on past this point, the man could see it. He stood in the woods and thought about what to do.

Today you heard a disarming statement that came straight from the heart of God. It came through his prophet Ezekiel. It was directed at God's people of old, who were suffering and struggling. This was the statement: “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God, so turn, and live.” This statement comes at the end of difficult dialogue. God has been dealing with the attitude of his people. They think that it isn't fair that they are going through hard times. If bad things can happen to them, they're wondering if God is really a God of justice. These are the kind of things that people say when they are in denial about their own contribution to the problem. In other words, human beings have the extraordinary ability to pin the blame on other people, situations and circumstances, and even God—it's His fault—rather than deal with the sin that is in my heart. I'm not going to ask if you've ever done this. I'll just say that I have, and that it is all too easy for me to justify my own behavior, thinking that the path that I'm on has got to be the right one. But here's a haunting Bible verse: Psalm 16:25, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”

The man stood in the forest, looking at the sign on the ground. Sure, it said this was the property line, and sure, there was a hole in the ground where the sign had been, but who knows if this really was the precise boundary—and besides, it was such a beautiful day, and there was a path stretching out in front of him. What would it hurt if he just explored a little bit more? With a quick glance over his shoulder—no turning back yet—he kept moving forward, and at first everything seemed just fine.

One of the sneakiest elements of sin is that it often results in what seems like a short-term win. I find someone else to blame, so my conscience is momentarily relieved. I cheat in a way that is unlikely to be discovered and now I have more stuff. I identify people whose opinion I

think is stupid and now I can feel superior at least to them. I finally get a little approval some others, and if I will relax my standards just a little, I can get a lot more recognition and admiration. But these little wins don't like to stay little. A little is good, but more is better, we think, and so our appetite for things that serve the self grows and grows. Left unchecked, this chase after more makes us miserable on the inside and unbearable on the outside, and it is a path that seems right yet ends in death, the ultimate isolation. And what does God have to say to someone like me, who seems determined to self-destruct? He says, "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone...so turn, and live.

Turn and live. It sounds so easy. Yet it can be very difficult to navigate.

The man in the woods was feeling pretty good about himself. He had passed the sign long ago, and was chugging right along, but then, the path split off again, and it didn't seem quite as well defined. He made a snap decision and continued down one of the trails, into a darker part of the woods, and it didn't occur to him at first that he was losing light. His pace quickened, even though he didn't really know where he was going. Soon he found himself walking within sight of people's backyards, and he encountered signs that were firmly posted to trees and fences, warning him in no uncertain terms not to cross over the line. But where was it? Where was he? This was supposed to have been just a little pre-dinner leg stretch. Why didn't I just turn around when I had the chance?

The thing is, we have to understand the stakes. If you take the wrong trail in a Metropark, and get turned around, probably the worst thing you have to deal with is embarrassment. If you take the wrong trail in life, and insist on trying to justify yourself while feeding your appetite for sin, you're heading for death; a dead heart; cut off from anything good forever. If you listen to God's invitation and turn around, you will finally and truly be living, because you will be living for more than just yourself. Turning around means turning your back on self-centeredness. And a person can only turn around and take the path of life if they believe that God is going to welcome them. You'd never turn around if you thought that when you did, God was going to punish you. The good news of Scripture is that when people turn from sin and self, God runs to them with an embrace of complete acceptance and the gift of total forgiveness. How can he do this and be a God of justice?

Here's how. Even though he said, "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone," He ordered that one should die for the sins of all; one would become the scapegoat; that one poor soul would pay the balance of all the sins and evil of humanity in one decisive action, which is exactly what happened at the cross of Jesus. Which means that when you turn and come to him, you're not turning to come pay up. You're turning to come receive the gift of a zero balance; full redemption; a beautiful gift of a new start. And though we never break out of this cycle of needing to turn around, God never tires of comforting those who give up on their sins and come to Him needing everything. It makes us humble, useful people—people who are always beginning to understand that all depends on God's mercy and grace in Jesus.

Turn and live.

