

Turn and Live



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Turn and Live

Nathaniel Vincent

Edited by
Jonathon D. Beeke



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Turn and Live

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Preface

One of the earliest lessons a parent must teach his or her child is to come when called. Of course, obeying this call involves a physical response from the child; the child must, upon hearing the parent's directive, turn from whatever occupies his or her attention and go to the parent. As every parent has learned, however, the desired response is not always the outcome. It is, I presume, easy to imagine an energetic young boy running after a ball just outside his grasp, and he hears his father calling him to come back. Further, it is easy to imagine that the boy's energies are so focused on the ball that he chooses to ignore his father and continues in his chase of the runaway ball. And yet, because of his fixation on the ball, the boy does not realize that he is rushing out onto a busy and dangerous street; the father, on the other hand, is aware of the danger and anxiously calls his son to turn back out of concern for the boy's safety.

This simple analogy parallels what you will read in the following pages in several aspects: just as the father

urgently calls out to his boy to stop his dangerous pursuit, so too God the Father graciously calls His creatures to turn from their dangerous pursuit of evil. In contrast, just as the boy recklessly chases an invaluable object and so places himself in danger, the sinner runs after the “shiny objects” of this world—material, temporal possessions or positions that will fade away—only to put himself under the very real threat and curse of the law: eternal death. Further, just as the running boy must stop, turn around, and even run from the imminent threat of the busy street, so too the sinner must stop, turn, and live.

God’s call to the sinner to turn and live is serious and demands a response. This small book contains a sermon preached by Nathaniel Vincent (1638–1697) concerning this solemn subject. The original sermon, first published in 1669, was titled *The Conversion of a Sinner: Explained and Applied From Ezekiel 33:11, “Turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?”* As evident from the title, Vincent’s text was this profound verse wherein God calls sinners to repentance. In a very clear, compelling, and passionate way, Vincent outlines the foolishness of continuing in the pathway of evil, the stubborn disposition of natural man to continue in this way, the gracious and repeated call of God to turn, and the wonderful remedy found in Christ. In typical Puritan fashion, Vincent also draws out several applications, or uses, of this doctrine.

While *Turn and Live* closely follows the content and structure of Vincent's original sermon, multiple edits and revisions have been made by the editor with the intent of making this sermon more readable and accessible. My desire is that upon taking up and reading *Turn and Live*, you may hear God's call to repent and believe in Him, a call that is repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments and here echoed by Vincent. While you yet have physical life, a simple choice remains: death or life. Pray God that He would raise you up by His Spirit from your dead state to live in Christ!

—Jonathon D. Beeke

CHAPTER 1

God's Call to Turn

Turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

—Ezekiel 33:11

It is not easy to discern whether man displayed greater foolishness in departing from God at first, or whether his folly is now more inexcusable in refusing to return to Him. At first, Adam knew by blessed experience how good it was to be near his Maker, to enjoy the light of His countenance in the state of innocence; and yet Adam turned his back on God and decided to depart from his Creator. As a result, mankind now feels the effects of this apostasy, for he experiences various miseries, calamities, and vexations; and yet how difficult it is to persuade him to come back again to God! How easily are people induced to yield to Satan, desiring, as it were, to give themselves into the hands of a murderer. But when the Lord, besides whom there is no Savior, repeatedly and earnestly calls, He often calls in vain.

People's hearts are dull, their ears deaf, and they refuse to acknowledge Him.

We can never sufficiently lament that sin has made many madmen in the world. Life and death, blessing and curse are set before them, but men choose death before life. The most astonishing and intolerable curses are embraced, while permanent blessings of the highest nature are rejected.¹ Thus, the Lord reasons not only in reference to sin, but in reference to punishment. In His appeal to the "house of Israel," He not only asks why they dare to transgress His law but also asks why they are so ready to die.

At the beginning of Ezekiel 33, the Lord appoints Ezekiel as a watchman over the house of Israel. He is commanded to lift up his voice when he sees the revenging sword drawn and ready to cut off the ungodly. Unless the watchman calls to the wicked to turn and live, he is an accessory to their death. If he does not warn, their blood will be required at his hand. Commissioned by God, the watchman is commanded to stop the mouths of evildoers who cavil against their Maker and, in effect, foolishly charge God.

1. In the original, Vincent includes the following Latin statement: "Pro superi! Quamta mortalia pectora caecae, Noctis habent!" Roughly translated this reads: "Oh heavens! How great is the night possessed by the mortal minds of the blind!" He is quoting from the *Metamorphoses* of Publius Ovidius Naso.

It is apparent that there was disagreement about who should be blamed for the destruction of sinners. The house of Israel very emphatically and boldly placed the blame on God, saying that the way of the Lord is not equal. But the God of mercy and truth vindicates Himself from their unjust charge and declares that if sinners were not perversely bent on their own ruin, they could escape any impending destruction. God swears upon His own life that the death of the wicked does not please Him. So, in this text, His voice is loud and repeated: "Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" In this passage the "saddle is set upon the right horse";² men's own wills are the cause of their woe.

The words in this passage express a very emotional and serious call. Several particulars may be observed:

- The persons called are the house of Israel.
- They are called to turn.
- The call is urgent, evident from the repeated phrase: "Turn ye, turn ye."
- The call requires a turning from their evil ways.
- God's call to turn is persuasive. An abundance of holy rhetoric is included in the argument, "Why will ye die?"

2. An idiom meaning "to set the blame on the true offender."

Without turning, death is certain. Although Satan may claim—as he did once to our first parents—“Ye shall not surely die” (Gen. 3:4), this will be found true: those “shall be turned into hell” who will not turn to God (Ps. 9:17). Every evil way will end in death. While there are several paths that comprise the broad way, they all conclude and meet in death, namely, the second death. In His grace, the Lord pities sinners and pleads with them, “Why will you die?” He asks, as it were, “Will you die because I am so quick to revenge? You know that I am slow to anger, and you know it by experience—if it were not so, I would have poured out My wrath on you long ago. Or will you die because I am relentless, not to be entreated when once provoked? I have often proclaimed Myself ready to forgive and full of mercy unto everyone who calls upon Me. Will you die because no one has ever told you the way to recover life, or because you do not know how to fly from the punishment you deserve? How often have I sent My prophets that you might believe, repent, and obey? But still you seek death; you are resolved to rush on in sin. If you perish, you may thank yourselves. If you are destroyed, it is because you chose destruction.”

Ezekiel 33:11 provides us with three doctrines that we will examine in the subsequent chapters. We will outline these doctrines and their applications as follows:

- The way of evil is the way of death (chapter 2).

- Men die as a result of their own will (chapter 3).
- The Lord repeatedly calls sinners to turn from their evil ways and live (chapter 4).
- Applications of these doctrines (chapter 5).

CHAPTER 2

The Way of Evil Is the Way of Death

The first doctrine we can draw from Ezekiel 33:11 is that every evil way leads to death. In other words, the pathway of moral evil is destructive to those who walk in it. Even though evil paths may seem right, they are to be considered dangerous. Scripture affirms, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Prov. 14:12).

The pathway of evil often accelerates and hastens temporal death. That was the sentence God pronounced upon man’s fall: “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen. 3:19). Often the execution of this sentence is hurried because of sin. In fact, Scripture speaks of some who will “not live out half their days” because of their wickedness (Ps. 55:23). Those who fell and decayed in the wilderness might have lived to possess the land of promise were it not for their murmuring. At times they committed idolatry and fornication, and in the end God swore an oath that they should not enter Canaan. How the intemperate and unclean waste their

strength and punish themselves with so many diseases! And though miserably unprepared for judgment, they hasten their departure out of this world to the tribunal of Him who judges righteously.

God, who is our life, is not found in the way of evil. Though physically alive while we walk upon this earth, we are spiritually dead. Scripture says the Ephesians were dead in trespasses and sins while they walked according to the course of this world and had their conversation in the lusts of their flesh (Eph. 2:1–3). If the soul's life consists in being united to God, in being animated and acted upon by His Spirit, then iniquity that separates us from God must be counted as a deadly thing (Isa. 59:2).

The evil ways indicated in this verse are the beaten path to hell's damnation, to everlasting death. No one ever came to hell except through these ways, and everyone who continues to walk in them without turning will end there. The enemy upon the pale horse is certainly dreadful, but when hell—as the second horse—follows immediately after, who can stand strong? No heart can endure hell. One of the Fathers called this second death the “deathless death,”¹ or “the death that is immortal,” because the sinner is never delivered from his pain; he is always tortured, but never released. The fire still burns,

1. Greek: *thanatos athanatos*.

but never consumes its victim; the worm still gnaws, but is never satisfied.

O blinded soul, why are you rushing wildly onward? Is it gain, delight, and happiness that you seek? While you may imagine that you are pursuing this, if you persist to dash along the broad way, it is not gain, but loss; not pleasure, but pain; not happiness, but extreme misery that will be your reward. Stop your course and leave this lower path (Prov. 15:24)! Depart from the way to hell and instead wisely seek the way to life that is above.

The Righteousness of God Displayed in the Punishment of Death

As we have already seen, the way of evil is the way of death. But some may question whether this is just. God's righteousness in punishing evildoers with death is evident in numerous ways. First, evil ways are expressly forbidden by Him, the supreme lawgiver, the One who has power to save and to destroy. Should man, weak and wretched as he is, affront and despise God's majesty and authority that is so infinitely above him, he justly deserves infinite punishment. Furthermore, the Lord presents and offers Himself to sinners if they will forsake their evil ways and thoughts; if a sinner rejects that offer, preferring the empty world and vile lusts before the blessed God, reason itself declares it right that the impenitent sinner be eternally separated from Him.

This “pain of loss,”² or loss of God, is properly the death spoken of here; it is the very hell of hell.

Secondly, sinners are threatened with death. If they continue on the path that brings them under the lash of punishment, it is just and right that they should experience the pain that results from their presumption. Sinners are warned to flee from the wrath to come, and if they do not heed this warning, that promised wrath will justly overtake them. They cannot plead that they did not know their Master’s will or that they were ignorant of the penalty for their rebellion. Those who enjoy the gospel’s light but do not bow under it have often been informed it is God’s will that they sorrow and repent of their sin. Even more, they know it is God’s will that they believe in His Son, and they know that He desires their sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4). They have often been warned of the punishment to be endured by those who continue in willful disobedience. As they have accused the Lord of being a liar with their continued unbelief, it is fitting and just that He vindicate His truth; it is just that He cause them to feel those plagues and torments, for they ignored His many warnings.

Thirdly, sinners are not only threatened with death if they continue in their evil ways, they are also shown the way of life and peace, a much preferred path to walk. God freely offers strengthening grace to sinners. But if the

2. Latin: *poena damni*.

sinner disregards the glory and immortality promised at the end of the way and rejects that help and grace offered along the way, but instead prefers the path of destruction and misery (Rom. 3:16), he wrongs his own soul. God is thus righteous in destroying the defiant sinner.

Warning against the Way of Death

The one use I will make of this doctrine is to caution you against these evil ways that are the ways of death. You who have, through grace, left them, take heed of declining toward them. Many saints have paid significant costs when they have stepped aside. Their falls have defiled them and broken their bones. Those of you who still resolve to walk in these ways, open your eyes and see where you are going! Upon reading these lines, stop without delay for fear that sudden death, destruction, and damnation come upon you, and there is no possibility of escape (1 Thess. 5:3).

Do not let the so-called profit of evil ways blind you. Riches are deceitful; they appear to be what they are not, and while we are eagerly pursuing them we are tricked and cheated of far truer riches. Running after earthly treasure, we miss heavenly treasure that will never fail (Luke 12:33). Do not be deluded by mammon. While evil ways may promise satisfaction, ease, and contentment, the result can only be trouble and vexation. The Lord likens riches to thorns, partly because they tend to choke the good seed of the Word, and partly

because they pierce those who idolize them. If you were to take God's just balances and weigh the gain of your evil ways, and compare this with the loss that you do and will sustain, it would become apparent that Satan's heart and the sinful heart's plea of profit is very unreasonable. Although the sinner may gain the earth, he loses God's grace; he may gain gold, but loses God. If you persist in your evil way you may gain a little of the world—something to be kept for a little while—but you lose your soul and eternal glory.

Do not let the pleasures of these evil ways ensnare you. The pleasures of sin usually delight only the more brutish part of man. A rational human being acts below himself when he nurses pleasures that are shared by the beasts. Solomon had an abundance of them. Whatever his eyes desired, he gave them; he did not withhold his heart from any joy. But later he found these pleasures to be so meaningless, so base and unsuitable, that, in the midst of them, he cried out, "All [is] vanity and vexation of spirit" (Eccl. 2:10–11). Pleasures may seem like delightful dreams, but they are short-lived. Affliction and death, or hell itself, soon awaken us. Those who love pleasure more than God do not really know what they choose and what they refuse. Promised pleasure is the bait that covers sin, causing us to swallow it with eagerness. It is the fatal potion that stupefies you and makes you lie senseless while in extreme danger. Promised pleasures are the fine—but very strong—cord that Satan uses

to draw men down to the chambers of death. Indeed, they are the fuel that heats the burning lake. Revelation 18:7 states, "How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her." It is certain that one day sensual persons will experience eternal pain for all their fleeting pleasures!

Do not let the multitude of evildoers sway or harden you. Lot walked alone in the way of righteousness even though Sodom was generally defiled by ungodly behavior. He would not follow a multitude to do evil. Christ said, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. 7:14), but He never intended that His disciples should tread along the beaten path of the world. Sinner, do not deceive yourself. If you sinfully do what others do, your reward will be as theirs; together you will be cast into hell for your wickedness.

In hell it will be no comfort to have companions in your misery, but rather among the damned there will be a torturing grief and indignation at the sight of each other as each recalls what incarnate devils the others were to his soul and how they helped forward his condemnation. This may have been the reason why the rich man of Luke 16 was so unwilling that his brothers should come to his place of torment; if he was damned for sins that he assented to and committed with them in his lifetime, their company with him in hell would have only added to his anguish. We commonly say in this life,

“The more, the merrier,” but in hell it will be, “The more, the sadder.” When God has all of His enemies in one place and none of His people are mingled with them, then His fierce wrath will be stirred up and He will pour out His fury upon them.