

Too late to turn back?

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

--Jonah 1:11-12

Why would Jonah prefer suicide to repentance?

Have you thought about that question? Perhaps you haven't, because you've heard this story since you were a kid, and you know it well. You know that Jonah is going to be swallowed by a whale and survive, so maybe it doesn't immediately dawn on you when you read the above verses what is happening here. Jonah is saying, "Kill me, and the storm will stop for you." At this moment, Jonah has no idea that God has no intention of letting him die. He has no idea that he won't get out of preaching to Nineveh that easily.

So the question remains, why would Jonah prefer suicide to turning back and obeying God? Surely the storm would also have stopped if Jonah said, "Just turn the boat around and take me back, so that I may return to serving the Lord, and the storm will stop."

Instead, Jonah offers them only two options, neither of which are good. They could continue trying to row their way through this treacherous storm and die themselves, or they could throw him out of the boat and let him drown with the dirty deed on their hands.

In the verses that follow, they try the first option; and since it fails, they try the second. And the storm stops, just like Jonah said. The next devotional will discuss what happened after that, which is described in the most famous part of the book of Jonah. But before we get to that next week, we still have to answer tonight's question.

Could it be that Jonah was so deeply devoted to rebellion against God that he was saying to himself, "If I die, I die. I'd rather die than go back and obey God anyway"?

You may think that, and I'll confess I can't prove you wrong, because the Bible doesn't specifically tell us why Jonah was choosing this course of action. But I really don't think that was Jonah's attitude.

I think Jonah was doing what many Christians do when they are facing the storms of life head-on, and realizing that they have brought God's

discipline upon themselves by willfully sinning against Him. They give up. They realize that they should have obeyed God in the first place, but they think, "it's too late to turn back now."

Perhaps it's just human nature to think that. Perhaps they've heard it from well-meaning preachers of the Word, who gave them the impression that although God's mercy is abundant, it doesn't necessarily reach them in their personal situation. So they throw in the towel on serving God. They drop out. They give in to a life of sin, because they think it's the best they can hope for now.

Maybe that's where you are today spiritually. Maybe someone even told you that because of your embarrassing public failure, you can never accomplish what God once called you to do. If that's the case for you, I invite you to consider Jonah. Look at how God was still working in His life, even when he least deserved it. (Then have a look at Peter at the end of John's gospel, to reinforce it.)

The chastening hand of God is not designed to make us lose hope. It is designed to discipline and re-direct us when we get off course in life. If you are in a storm you've brought upon yourself, don't give in to feelings of hopelessness. If you're within reach of God's punishment, then you're also within reach of His grace. Don't give up and jump out of the boat. Just turn the boat around. Confess your disobedience, and forsake it to follow His will. Then stop grieving over the mistakes of your past; receive His grace and start living for the future.

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