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“HOW LONG HALT YE BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS ?”

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“And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.”—1 KINGS xviii. 21.

IT has often been remarked that they who have been most successful in their efforts, and who have acquired greatest eminence in any particular department of life, have been men of one idea. By this is meant that the purpose, which they were seeking to accomplish, was always before their minds, absorbing and enlisting all their thoughts and energies. Their attention was not directed to a multiplicity of objects, which could not but tend to confusion of thoughts and waste of strength. On the contrary, they labored with an eye single to the accomplishment of some one thing, which was most dear to their hearts. This is what may be called living and acting with singleness of aim or purpose. The man of wealth; the man of high attainments in scholarship; the man of honors, whether political or military; the man of eminence in art or science all alike have won their way to such celebrity and renown, by adopting this principle and giving constant and exclusive attention to the direction of their aim, the accomplishment of their purpose. A hundred such could be named, who, on the pages of



history, stand out foremost in their chosen spheres of action. Newton, Bacon, Locke, Humboldt, in science or metaphysics; Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Whitfield, in theological attainments, and preaching ability and power; Webster, Clay, Calhoun, William Pitt, in statesmanship; Napoleon Bonaparte, and others, both ancient and modern, in military science, illustrate the great advantage of singleness of aim in the pursuit of any object. In fact, it is what is sometimes called "decision of character"; and our text, with its context, is intended to enforce the lesson of its necessity and importance.

The metaphor "halting" is taken from the unequal walk of a lame person, who is sometimes fast, and sometimes slow; sometimes on one side of the way, and sometimes on the other. To a spectator it is uncertain whether he will persevere to the end of his journey or leave the path with the vain hope of finding one that is easier and better. No reliance can be placed in such a person as to the object or purpose for which he sets out. Now what is thus true in the physical is equally true in the moral and religious world. Multitudes fail of the success they desire, and come short of the enjoyment they would otherwise experience, just because they are vague, uncertain and vacillating in their aims and efforts.

This was the conduct of the Israelites in their relations to God and the duties growing out of them. They wavered in opinion and varied in practice, sometimes worshipping Jehovah, and at other times worshipping Baal, just as their convictions or interests prevailed. They sought to make a compromise between the two, and to mingle their worship so as to accommodate both flesh and spirit. Baal's prophets would, in all probability, have yielded very readily to such a plan, but they could never have gained God's consent, for he rejects *in*

toto all worship or service which does not exalt him as supreme in the heart. Elijah, therefore, in a spirit of the most scathing rebuke, condemned their unmanly and wavering conduct: "*How long halt ye between two opinions?*" he demands—thus placing before their minds, by a metaphor which they all understood, the contemptible manner of their walk before God, and the wicked folly of persisting in it. Then he called upon them without further delay to determine whether of the two was the self-existent and eternal God, the Creator, Governor and Judge of the world; and to follow him alone. They were to consider diligently the proofs and arguments respectively by which the claims of God and Baal were sought to be established; determine on which side was the stronger claim, the preponderance of proof; and show at once by their action that they submitted to its convincing power. If the Lord was God, they were to follow him alone; or, if Baal, then they were to follow him. What he demanded was that they must be wholly on one side or the other, and must persevere as thus they decided so as to be harrassed by no conflicting doubts.

Let us attend to the lessons which these words suggest, and try to profit by them:

1. There are three classes of persons who are not included among those thus addressed; who are not to be regarded as "halting between two opinions," or undecided on the subject of religion. One is the openly skeptical and profane, who bear the mark of the beast; who make no pretensions to religion, but have made up their minds to reject it as a foolish superstition unworthy of belief; and many of whom hate it, oppose it and persecute it.

Another class is the decidedly sincere, some of whom are very zealous, useful and spiritually strong; and

others of whom are weak and feeble, but fully decided as followers of Christ, and so positive in their convictions that no one can doubt as to where they belong. Sincerity is the test; and where such aim at loving and serving the Lord in truth, the Lord owns and blesses them as his people.

The third class are those who are in an awakened condition, and earnestly seeking the Lord; whose faces are turned Zionward, and longing to be consciously within its gates and among the true and accepted worshippers of God; who are actually standing in the way, and inquiring for the good old paths, and ready to walk as they may be divinely directed. They are like the Philippian jailer, who, under deep conviction and longing for the peace and rest which conscious forgiveness gives, cried out: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

None of these three classes are among the undecided; those who are halting between two opinions. The skeptical and profane blasphemer of God, of the Bible, of the plan of redemption as there revealed in and through Christ Jesus, and of all sacred institutions, have made their choice, and are so wedded to it in word and act that there is no mistaking where they belong, or as to their attitude toward the Christian religion. The decidedly sincere of all grades are equally positive in *their* choice of God, Christ and the great salvation on the terms offered; and utter no uncertain sound in giving their testimony. Those who, under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, are seeking to be saved in God's own way, are ready as soon as they see and know what that way is, to accept and walk in it as the only way. They seek the Lord not with a divided but whole heart; and, according to divine promise, they will therefore surely find him.

2. The *undecided*, or such as "halt between two opinions," may be divided into four or five classes. There are those, for instance, who are among the people of God and class themselves with them, but who are not of them. Some are there merely through the influence of education; others from the fears of conscience, which will not allow them to neglect the church and its ordinances. Yet all such are only *hearers*, and not *doers* of the word. They do not hunger and thirst after spiritual things, but are afraid to wholly neglect or cast them aside; and thus they are "halting between two opinions." There are those, also, who avoid open impiety, and yet do not sincerely and with their hearts serve God. They would be horrified at the very idea of being notoriously wicked; and yet God is not at all in their hearts. They are not at all spiritually minded; and they have never really felt their sins to be a heavy burden, from which they would gladly be delivered. There are those, also, who try hard to unite the world and the church, to worship both God and mammon. They call themselves industrious, prudent, and sociable; but the truth is their hearts are exclusively and idolatrously set on the world in all its variously attractive forms and phases, such as are calculated to fascinate and please the natural, unrenewed man. They are covetous, and pleasure-seekers. They love gold, and are intent upon the accumulation of wealth for its own sake and for what it can do in gratifying their selfish aims and desires. They love amusement for its own sake, and hunt for and enjoy it as one of their chief occupations in life. But along with all this, they wish to be found in the company of the sincerely devout and pious, and to be classed with Christians; because, as they think, their temporal respectability and standing will give them influence in the church.

Then, again, there are those who labor to unite works and grace, in effecting their salvation. They do not *fully* trust in *either*, but in *both partially*, and therefore come short of fully realizing that salvation which comes through Jesus Christ only, and by an exclusive trusting in and resting upon his all-sufficient righteousness. There is still another class of the undecided, the halters between two opinions, whom I ought to mention. They are those who would privately but not publicly profess Christ. They fear the cross connected with a public profession; the ridicule, reproach, scorn, and trials of many kinds which are apt to follow. They fear being laughed at by their old associates; and pointed out and spoken of, in a spirit of ridicule, as having become pious, etc. They fear the power of temptation, and that they will not be able successfully to hold out against it; and so they decline a *public* profession of religion, and hold on to Christ *in private*, so as really to be at *liberty* to *yield to temptation* and enjoy *forbidden indulgences* without being called to account publicly and charged with inconsistency. What is this but parleying with the tempter, and giving him an advantage in the fact of their feeling a lessened responsibility, by not making a public confession of Christ? And, besides, such a disposition makes it evident that they are not sincere; else they would know that none of us have sufficiency in *ourselves* to withstand the tempter, and that our sufficiency is in *Christ*, who is always ready to help and strengthen those who look to and lean trustingly on him. There are and can be no silent partners in Christ's firm.

It is stated that a minister in Brooklyn, New York, was once called on by a business man, who said: "I come, sir, to inquire if Jesus Christ will take me into the

concern as a *silent partner*." "Why do you ask?" replied the minister. "Because," said he, "I wish to be a member; and do not wish anybody to know it." The minister's reply was: "Christ takes no silent partners. The firm must be Jesus Christ & Co.; and the names of the *company*, though they may occupy a subordinate place, must all be written out on the sign-board." Now all these, and such as these, are "halting between two opinions"; and to them is addressed, by way of rebuke, the sharp and cutting inquiry of the text. It is all the more pungent and awakening, because, in the face of accumulative, convincing evidence of the superior claims of the Christian religion as regards its nature and origin, its influence and advantages both for time and eternity, they are without *excuse* and all the more *guilty*, if they do not with positive conviction and resolute determination accept it as their life religion, and by faith and practice hold fast to it under all circumstances and until they reach and wear the promised crown.

3. This leads me to remark that God has wonderfully condescended to establish by the most undoubted proofs those truths which concern himself; and which, in their practical application, will secure our present and eternal happiness. Elijah, although alone and single-handed, nevertheless challenged the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal to make trial with him as to which was the true God. His proposal was so reasonable that the people at once agreed to it; and, therefore, Baal's prophets were left to the alternative of either complying with it, or of admitting that their God was a dumb and impotent idol. They agreed to the proposal; and consented that he who should answer by fire, in consuming the sacrifice offered him, should be regarded as the true God, and worthy of supreme and exclusive worship and adoration. In this

trial Elijah conceded the preference, in every external circumstance, to the false prophets. He gave them every outward advantage, in order that his victory might be the more noticeable and complete, and that Jehovah, the true God, might receive greater honor. He therefore dug a trench about the altar, and filled it with water. He also poured a great quantity of water upon the altar, upon the sacrifice and upon the wood, with the view, doubtless, of avoiding all possible suspicion that any fire had been concealed. This would make the divine interposition more illustrious and convincing. When everything was ready, and the prophet had invoked the divine presence so as to make good the claim that he was God alone, and to turn back again to himself the hearts of his astrayed people, *then* the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. Nothing could have been more convincing; and the people, therefore, prostrated themselves before God with mingled feelings of terror and reverence.

Thus did God condescend to prove to his ancient and misguided people his claims as the true and self-existent Jehovah, who alone is entitled to the exclusive worship of all his creatures. To have hesitated after that, and still to have withheld from him their exclusive service, would have been indeed a most wicked and obstinate rebellion.

Now the same condescension is still shown in furnishing proofs that ought to be equally convincing, not only of his existence, but also of the revelation he has made in the sacred Scriptures to man as a spiritual and immortal being, and of the divine origin of those doctrines of grace and salvation which are suited to his condition as a sinner.

But I address myself particularly to those who are not skeptical, and would scorn to be classed among infidels, atheists, and blasphemers of sacred things. I take it for granted that you are convinced that there is an all-wise, intelligent, self-existent being called God, who created, governs and controls all things, both animate and inanimate.

You instinctively feel that there is such a being; and, therefore, you involuntarily cry to him for help when in great straits. You know that everywhere and among all tribes and nations this feeling or opinion prevails; and that, therefore, they appeal to and worship what they call God, whether true or false. This must be either from the fact that the idea of God is innate, born in us; or that this truth is so very obvious that it is discovered by the very first exertion of reason in persons of the most ordinary capacities; or that it has been handed down from the first man by tradition through all the ages. You know that as the beautiful landscape could not be put on canvas by pencil or brush without the guiding hand of a skilful artist; that as the machine, which is intelligently constructed for the accomplishment of a particular purpose, could not have come into existence without a designer and artificer; that as no building of any sort, great or small, and exactly suited to its aim, could have come together in all its wise arrangements by chance, but must have been the work of an intelligent, independent thinker and designer; so the universe with its wonders, our world with its adaptations to our use, its order, variety, and beauty, could not have merely happened thus, or come into existence without the agency of an all-wise Creator, who could think, and plan, and execute. You know all this; and are, therefore, convinced that there must be a self-

existent and eternal being, with infinite wisdom and capabilities, whom we call God.

You admit the fact that as God's creatures, the work of his hands, we belong to him for his service and honor; that the ability he has given, the powers with which he has endowed us, are to be exercised and used as he originally intended; and that he holds us, as intelligent beings who are capable of choice, accountable for what we do in the matter. He is our Creator, and we his creatures, who owe him all the service we are made to give, just as man's inventions and productions are intended for his service. He is our Ruler, our Sovereign, and we his subjects, whose duty it is to obey; just as in civil government the citizen is expected to be in subjection to those in authority. If we fail in rendering due service to God as our Creator, or proper obedience to him as our Sovereign, then we incur his displeasure, and are exposed to the penalty.

You are ready to acknowledge, at least theoretically, if not practically, that all mankind, and you yourselves included, have come sadly short of such justly-expected and rightly-required service and obedience. You have come short in thought, word and act; and you know it well, and would feel it most keenly if you would only thoughtfully and prayerfully consider the matter in all its bearings; in the light of Scripture, reason, observation, and history. In the sight of God you are transgressors of his law, rebels against his authority, and acting contrary to his holy and righteous will, and against your own truest and best interests, both for time and eternity. The Scriptures plainly declare this; and your own conscience confirms it. You are then guilty before God, exposed to the penalty, and already condemned.

You know that you have not the ability and cannot, through your own sufficiency, escape from under this sentence of condemnation. Your kindly, honest, and upright dealings with your fellow-men will not be a sufficient covering of your guilt from God's judicial eye. Such righteousness may be good currency among men, and helpful in social life, but God will not accept it in exchange for his pardoning favor and the gift of eternal life. By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified before God; and, in his sight, all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. The laws of men are not our rule in the matter of salvation. Simply to obey them and nothing more is too narrow and short to commend us to God. Men make laws, just as tailors make garments to fit the crooked bodies of those they serve. In making laws, men try to suit the humors or whims of the people who are to be thus governed; but surely such laws are not sufficient to convince us of sin and to lead us in the way of true happiness. It is God's own prerogative to give a law to the conscience, and to the renewed motions of the heart. Human laws are good to establish proper converse with man, but they are too short and insufficient to establish proper converse with God; and, therefore, we must consult that rule which is the law of the Lord, that we may not come short of true blessedness. But God's law enjoins more than man in his morally weak and depraved state can accomplish; and when he seriously attempts to conform his life in thought, speech, and act to all its precepts, so as to be perfect in every respect, and satisfy God as well as his own conscience, he cannot but feel that he has made an utter failure, and come far short of what is required. He then turns longingly to God for light and for the help he needs, in his ignorance and helplessness. "Oh, that I knew where I

might find him" is his earnest, impassioned cry. And this suggests another very important fact, which you know, and that is, that God, who is love itself, and whose loving nature reaches out mercifully, wisely, and justly to all his creatures, especially to those created in his own image, responded to that earnest cry for help which only he can give. He has responded by giving them his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who is able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by him; who has done all that was needed to be done to remove every hindrance and open up for them completely the way of salvation; and who, as their surety and substitute, met every legal demand and paid all their debts. In his twofold person as God-man he was abundantly qualified for such a work, and triumphantly finished it to the glory of God and the redemption and salvation of all true believers. He is, therefore, what man, in the consciousness of his guilt and helplessness, longs for—the mighty Saviour.

You know and acknowledge all this, because in the Bible you have God's own inspired word, a special revelation from him, which comes to you in language and form so thoroughly human as to be suited to every capacity. It gives in a way that all who are accountable can readily understand all that they need to know for their salvation. It is all there, not mathematics, nor scientific lore, but what is able, through God's blessing, to make us wise unto salvation. The Bible was not intended to be a teacher of secular knowledge, or an expositor of the laws which govern the material universe. These things it refers to only incidentally and by way of illustration; and then it is usually according to commonly received and prevailing opinions on these subjects, so as to adapt its religious teachings the better to the people. Thus while it is thoroughly inspired and divine,

it is, at the same time, an intensely human book. Now since man needed just such a revelation, is it not at least probable that God would give it, and give it, too, in this very shape? It was love and mercy that prompted him to give us a special revelation, and to adapt it thus wisely to our condition, so as to be within our ready comprehension. Moreover, that the Bible is really God's word, his revelation to men of how they are to be saved from guilt and sin, is made evident from its own claim, its own testimony. I need not particularize here, because if you are a reader of it you cannot but see that such is its claim. But aside from its own testimony, the evidence both *internal* and *external* is *cumulative*. Its fulfilled prophecies and its recorded miracles are credentials to show that it is God who speaks. The frank and candid way in which its inspired writers speak of their own faults, and those of God's people, shows that it is a book which aims at the truth. The fact that it is composed of so many books, written by so many persons varying in culture, style, and surroundings, and stretching through many centuries; and that yet with it all there is such a remarkable oneness of spirit and aim, shows that they must have been under the guidance and control of a divine agency, such as the book itself claims. The loftiness of its teachings, the grandeur of the characters it has helped to fashion, and the comforts and even joy it imparts to the sorrowing and suffering, show that it is more than a mere human production, and must be from him who is the source of all true consolation. The testimony of experience, from those who have received its teachings and acted upon them, who have tasted of this good word of God, and seen that it is all it claims; and who, like the blind man with sight restored by Jesus, can say, "Whereas I was blind, now I

see," is a proof of its lofty claim, and shows that it can be relied on to do what it promises. Now these, and more which might be given, are powerful proofs that the Bible is God's word; his revelation to man, as a spiritual and immortal being, of what can be learned nowhere else; how he may be saved and eternally blessed; how God can be just, and the justifier of the ungodly.

All this you know and acknowledge; for it is not the skeptical I am addressing. You believe in God; in the immortality of our souls; in our personal accountability as God's creatures and subjects; in the fact that we have sinned and incurred his displeasure, and are, therefore, under condemnation; in our own insufficiency and helplessness to effect a deliverance; in the Bible as God's special revelation of what we need, and how we can be delivered and saved; in the fact that Jesus Christ is there made known and offered to us freely as the divinely-appointed and infinitely-sufficient Saviour; the way, the truth, and the life; the only way through which we can come into the reconciled presence of God the Father, and finally reach heaven; you have an intellectual belief in all this, for you accept and are convinced by the evidence that it is all true.

But now, what are you going to do about it? What do you propose to do about it to-day? What do you really think is your present duty to God in Christ, and to yourselves in view of all that has been done in divine love for your spiritual welfare? Will you still, and for an indefinite period, be contented with this mere intellectual believing; with merely believing these facts, and go no further? Will you halt right there, and while leaning with the intellect toward God, and Jesus Christ his loving, unspeakable gift, and the great salvation thus pro-

vided, be at the same time leaning toward the world with the heart, and actually preferring it to what you cannot but know is your greatest good? Will it be for your honor and safety to be thus two-faced, double-minded, reaching out in opposite directions; wavering between God and the world? Do you not know that to waver thus between duty and the world contrary to your own convictions of God, and to refuse all persuasion to resolve and be decided one way or the other, is exposing you to the risk of an eternal loss, and may allure you to a point beyond which there will be no help for you? Unresolvedness and half-purposes are an absolute hindrance to a sound conversion. If you would be converted and saved, as no doubt it is your intention some day, do not stand wavering, but resolve at once, and turn to God through Christ with a believing, trusting *heart* as well as *intellect*; and let it be seen and known that you are acting up to your real convictions of duty to yourself and your God.

If this were a doubtful business, I would not persuade you to do it rashly; or if there were any danger to your souls in thus resolving, I would say no more. But when it is a business that should be beyond all dispute with men and women of reason, why should you still waver and stagger, as if it *were* a *doubtful* business? What a shame it must be to be unresolved as to whether God or the world is to have our hearts, and command chiefly our affections and services. If it be a disgrace and an exhibition of folly for a man to be unresolved as to whether a bed of thorns or of feathers were the easier, or as to whether the great sun or a mere clod of earth was the more luminous and glorious, it must be a far greater shame and folly for a man to be unresolved as to whether it be God or the world that must make him happy, and

that should have the chief place in his heart ; and whether a life of sin or a life of holiness is the better life. Those who halt and waver between two opinions, in the matter of religion, are “like travellers who halt in indecision at cross-roads, with a furious storm and a dark night rapidly approaching ; or like a pilot who doubts what to do with the helm when the ship is driving before the wind through a dangerous channel.” To hesitate or waver at such a time about what to do involves a most fearful risk ; but not nearly so fearful as that which accompanies halting, wavering delay in the matter of religion ; in deciding the question of salvation by a prompt and immediate compliance with the provision made for it and with the terms on which it is offered. Nothing should be allowed to stand in the way and hinder such a decision. The dissuasions of the best and dearest friends should be rejected firmly and persistently for the sake of the soul ; its present and eternal welfare. A young man thus made up his mind and devoted himself to a religious life. His ungodly parents sent him many letters to dissuade him from it. But being fully decided to go on in his chosen course, when any such letters came to him he paid no attention to their contents, and threw them into the fire ; and so when friends, kindred, or associates stand between us and Christ, and try to turn us away from him, and to keep us from becoming his believing and devoted followers, they must be disregarded ; for it is a question of eternal life or eternal death, and should be decided at once ; because the future is still uncertain, and we know not when the curtain will fall.

“Choose ye this day whom ye will serve ;” and may God help you to make a right choice and to make it now.