

THE EVIL AND DANGER OF HALTING BETWIXT TWO OPINIONS. *

SERMON XXIV.

1 KINGS xvi. 21,

And Elijah said, How long halt ye betwixt two opinions ?

AMONG the crowds of irreligious men in the visible church, there are few, if any, so positively determined against God and religion, as never to have a thought of repentance and reformation. Reason and interest appear so much on the side of religion, that where conscience possesses any power at all, one can hardly fail in having sometimes favourable thoughts on that side. But indecision and unsettledness in that weighty matter ruins men. It is so long ere they come to a point, that death often overtakes them before they have got the matter fixed ; and they are set beyond the possibility of doing any thing for their souls, before ever they have resolved firmly what to do for them. The text is Elijah's expostulation with a great assembly in that dangerous case. The worship of Baal was set up, and authorised in Israel by Ahab, and patronised by his courtiers. Thence the body of the people, though they did not utterly renounce the worship of Jehovah, yet they were greatly corrupted with that idolatry. God had on this account sent a famine on them, and, though it had continued three years and a half, it had not reformed them. But Ahab lays the blame of this calamity on Elijah ; Elijah retorts it boldly on him. They agree that all Israel be gathered with Baal's priests, who were dispersed over all the country, and the priests of the groves, who were Jezebel's chaplains, that the whole matter betwixt God and Baal, Elijah and Ahab, might be decided. The assembly being convened, Elijah comes to them, and, without observing any ceremony, or beginning to intercede with God for rain to them, he falls a-pleading God's cause with them, expostulating with them on God's behalf, as in the text : " How long (said he) halt ye betwixt two opinions ?"

In which expostulation, we have,

I. The matter of it ; their halting betwixt two opinions. Here he attacks them on two points, and charges them with a grievous fault, an unaccountable weakness in the most weighty concerns of their souls.—He charges them,

(1.) With weak and wavering heads. They had two opinions ; by the one they had a value for Baal, by the other for Jehovah. Not only did some of that people in their judgment declare for Baal,

others for Jehovah, but the same persons at one time thought it best to follow Baal, at another time Jehovah; they were undetermined in this matter of the greatest importance. Their thoughts in this case were wavering, going hither and thither, like top-branches of trees going with the wind, which is the Holy Ghost's own metaphor in the original word of the text.—They were chargeable,

(2.) With unsteady feet. They halted betwixt these two, and they went from Baal to the Lord, and from the Lord to Baal again. Thus, passing from side to side, they were poor lame souls, (this is the Holy Ghost's own metaphor), they did not only limp, like men lame of one leg, (the best Christians carry such a halt with them, till they come to the grave), but they were like men lame of both legs, for this is the import of the original word, 2 Sam. iv. 4. They crooked to both sides, they went wavering from side to side, never straight, one time they were for Baal, another time for Jehovah, they were never steadily fixed.—In the expostulation, there is,

2. The manner of it: "How long will ye halt?" &c. They had been several years in that case, and yet were not come to a point. One might think the case was not so very difficult, whether Jehovah or Baal should be their choice; but wonder not at it, for the case is even as plain betwixt the Lord and your lusts and idols, yet year after year you cannot come to a point. The phrase is urgent; it imports,—the shamefulness, the baseness of their conduct, that they should be so long in deciding in a matter so very clear, stumbling at that rate in broad day-light;—its grievousness to the Spirit of God; he was so weary with bearing with them, that he would fain have them come to a point, and therefore rouses them up to it.

From the expostulation thus explained, I would observe the following doctrines, viz.

DOCT. I. That to be still wavering and undecided in the absolute and final choice betwixt the Lord and idols, is most abominable.

DOCT. II. That an unequal and unsteady walk, here-away, there-away, betwixt the Lord and idols, is an unaccountable and abominable way of walking through the world.—These I shall shortly consider in their order.

DOCT. I. That to be still wavering and undecided in the absolute and final choice betwixt the Lord and idols, is most abominable.—In speaking to this I shall only drop a few things,

I. For explication of the point.

II. For confirmation of it. And then,

III. Make some application.—I am,

I. To explain the point.—In order to this, consider,

1. That the Lord and idols are sniters for the heart of every man and woman that hears the gospel ; and because that idols have the first love, they strive to retain it, and the Lord comes to recover it. Lusts court it, and therefore the gospel teaches to deny them, Tit. ii. 12, “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and while it thus teaches, it brings a better offer. The devil, the world, and the corrupt nature, are proxies to agent for our lusts : the Lord’s Spirit, his ministers, and conscience, act for the Lord.—Consider,

2. That the sinner’s heart is urged with offers and arguments on both hands. God makes his offers, and urges them with the strongest arguments, taken from the certainty of eternal happiness, or misery, of enjoying his unspeakable love, or incurring his dread displeasure : Isa. lv. 2, “Wherefore do ye spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not ? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your souls delight themselves in fatness.” Satan is not behind hand in pains to urge his offers, he plies them with allurements of present profit and pleasure, most suited to the corrupt heart, which naturally gapes for them.—Consider,

3. That there can be no enjoying of both together : Matth. vi. 24, “No man can serve two masters ; for either he will hate the one, and love the other ; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” The Lord will not deal shares with lusts and idols, the offer is peremptory on other terms, “If ye take me, let these go.” If the matter could be agreed betwixt the Lord and his rival idols, the wavering soul would soon be at a point, and would embrace both. But that cannot be : if the Lord be received, he must have the crown, and the most beloved lusts must be nailed to the cross : Gal. v. 24, “And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts.”—Consider,

4. That the matter must be determined by the sinner’s free choice : Josh. xxiv. 15, “Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.” The Lord will not take possession without the sinner’s consent, for it is the heart he seeks, and if that be wanting, there is no bargain. And the choice must be an absolute and a final one ; there must be a final deciding of this cause, so that thereafter the soul may cleave to the one, with full purpose of heart, and altogether abandon the other.—Consider,

Lastly, That the Lord requireth the sinner’s decided answer. But here the sinner wavereth ; he is neither determined to give up altogether with the Lord, nor to give up wholly with his lusts ; sometimes he is almost persuaded, but never altogether. So there comes

still one off-put on the back of another; and when the sinner has been at the advising and deciding this business days and years, he is as far from a point the last day as the first.—I am now to propose some considerations,

II. For confirmation of this point.—Consider,

1. That there is no competition here in point of real value. What is the dead idol Baal, in comparison with Jehovah, the living God? What are our filthy lusts, in comparison with Christ? Jer. xxiii. 28, “The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully: what is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord.” It is a disgrace on our reason, to put them in the balance together, and argues a fearful blindness with which mankind are seized, once to entertain a doubt which to choose.—Consider,

2. That it is ingratitude of the deepest dye, not readily to fall in with the offer. When the potter is making suit to his own clay, the mighty God to his own creature worm man, to put off his offer, because of the craving of the heart after filthy lusts, these brats of hell, and spawn of the old serpent, is certainly ungrateful. The Lord might have left us with them, to have made the best of them we could, which would have been no better than death; for what else could have resulted from our drinking that cup of poison? But now, when he comes to offer us life, how horrible is it to be wavering and undetermined, whether we will accept of the Lord and life, or not!—Consider,

Lastly, That this warning is on a matter of the utmost weight, and what we have not one to-morrow allowed us to advise upon. Our souls lie at stake, eternal salvation or damnation depend on our choice; if we make the Lord our choice, we are happy for ever; if ye do not, we are ruined for ever; it is, “To-day, if ye will hear his voice,” Psalm xcv. 7; so that, if death carry you off undetermined, your eternal destruction is unalterably fixed; and what an abominable thing is it, then, to be still wavering?—I now proceed,

III. To make some application of the subject. And with this design, I would expostulate with you halters and undetermined sinners, who are not yet come to a point in the matter of your choice betwixt Christ and your lusts, in the words of the text, “How long halt ye betwixt two opinions?” How long will it be ere you come to a point how to dispose of that heart of yours? You have had many rich gospel-calls from the Lord, and many communion-calls, and yet you have not freely abandoned your idols, and made choice of the Lord, to this day. Still you are halting, undetermined, and wavering. How long shall it be thus?—In managing this expostulation, I would ask,

I. Who are the wavering, undetermined halters betwixt the Lord and their lusts?—I answer,

(1.) Ye who to this day never found the time to break your covenant with your lusts, and to enter into covenant with God, either in pretence or reality. Are there not some here, who never gave their personal consent to the baptismal covenant, who are utter strangers to personal covenanting with God in Christ? they have not even expressly in words renewed the covenant made for them in baptism, much less have they ratified it with their own solemn consent before the Lord: they are woeful halters, but without making this choice they can never see heaven: Eph. ii. 12, "Strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world."—Ye are the wavering,

(2.) Who time after time slight the sacrament of the Lord's supper, not preparing yourselves to partake of it. What makes you always and constantly mere spectators and onlookers of the seal of the covenant, and that solemn engagement to be the Lord's, but that you are halters betwixt the Lord and your lusts? Were there a bargain in your offer, of which all the partners were obliged to strike hands with the party that makes it with them, and you stood by, and would not give your hand; would not that prove you not to be determined as yet for the bargain? You would be glad to have the bargain ratified betwixt God and you, if you were really for it; Psalm lxxviii. 31, "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God."—To this some may object,

We would fain take the sacrament, but they will not give us tokens of admission.—To this I answer,

What hinders your receiving them, but your gross ignorance, or your ungodly and scandalous life, which certainly ought to do it: Matth. vii. 6, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs." But why do not ye get the knowledge of God and religion, and reform your lives, that ye may sit down at the Lord's table? And here lies the matter, you are not so far determined yet as to quit your lusts, for all the communion with God that is to be had in the sacrament.—Such of you are halting,

(3.) Who have had your convictions of sin, and are in so far satisfied, that you should have given up with it, but your hearts were never brought to part with it to this day. Are there not many who are standing undetermined this day on the carcasses of their murdered convictions? Acts xxiv. 25, "Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time, when I have a more convenient season, I will call for thee." They have been lashed by their consciences, to drive them to the Lord from their lusts; nay, they had

much ado to resist these lashings; but, after all, these impressions are worn off, and they are not yet determined.—Such are wavering,

(4.) Who have (often perhaps) been aiming at the covenant, but always stuck at one thing. You have been brought to a point in many things, but one thing you could never yet get over. O miserable halter betwixt God and the idol of jealousy! shall that one thing mar the winning of thy soul? If you be not content with all the articles of the covenant, without exception, you have your choice to make, yet you are not determined; Mark x. 21, “Jesus said unto him, One thing thou lackest,” &c.—Such are halting,

(5.) Who are still at fast-and-loose with God, and whom nothing can bind, who do with their vows, as the dog with his collar, that slips it off and on as he pleases: Psalm lxxviii. 36, 37, “Nevertheless, they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongues. For their heart was not right with him, neither were they stedfast in his covenant.” There are many of our communicants of this sort, who come under the vows of God very lightly, and as lightly soon after slip out from under the tie; the truth is, they never consider the matter with due seriousness. They make choice of the Lord, but, in very deed, their hearts were never in earnest determined.—Such of you are wavering,

Lastly, And in a word, who have not expressly embraced God and Christ, but cleave to your lusts. Our Lord has often come to you in the gospel, requiring your last answer, but you have neither yet given it, nor will you either plainly say ye will betake yourselves to your lusts and idols for altogether, nor are you come the length of an honest resolve to give over with them for altogether. Ye are undoubtedly woful undetermined halters.

2. I must ask at you, How long will ye halt, and be undetermined?

(1.) Have ye not halted long enough already betwixt God and your lusts? 1 Pet. iv. 3, “For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles.” Have ye not often enough sent away the Lord in his messengers groaning from you, because ye could not be won yet? (1.) Young halters, may not ye, after ten, fifteen, and twenty years, or more, be at a point whether ye will be the Lord’s or not? I assure you, God has been at a point with many one in that time, who never got your length, but their states are determined in another world already, without possibility of alteration. Every seven years ye have been in the world, ye have had an year of Sabbaths, in these Sabbaths many, many a call. And will ye yet be undetermined? (2.) Old halters, may not ye be at a point, after thirty, forty, fifty, or sixty years ye have

taken to advise in? will ye halt on, till ye slip into a grave, into hell, undetermined. All the sermons ye have heard, the communions ye have waited on, even all the rods and the mercies ye have met with, have left you where they found you, as undetermined as ever, and will ye still go away this day as undetermined as ye came?

2dly, How can you be at ease as long as such a weighty matter is undetermined? Poor soul! while thou art halting, thou art standing on the brink of the pit, and whether death or life shall be thy lot, whether heaven or hell, is still as to thee undetermined. Till thou determine the point to be the Lord's, and to renounce all thy idols, Satan has the hold of thee, and there is nothing between death and thee but one step, thou haugest over the pit by the long-worn thread of divine patience; and whenever that gives way, thou art lost for ever: John iii. 36, "He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him."

(3.) Do you not wonder, that God has waited so long upon you, that he has not taken your slights and scorns for your final answer? Is it not surprising, that he has not recalled his ambassadors, and denounced war against you, to be carried on for ever? Ye must needs wonder that it is not so, when ye consider the infinite greatness of him who makes suit to you, the meanness and vileness of those whom he courts, and the abominable competitors which ye prefer to him.

(4.) Are ye not afraid lest the Lord halt, and proceed no farther in seeking after you? that this may be the last call that ever you may get? Luke xiv. 24, "For I say unto you, that none of these men which were bidden, shall taste of my supper." Sit this call, and who knows but the Lord may from this time leave you to your lusts? Psalm lxxxi. 11, 12, "But my people would not hearken to my voice, and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lusts and they walked in their own counsels." Hos. iv. 17, "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone." Saying, Cease my Spirit, cease conscience, ministers, ordinances, judgments, mercies; give that man no more disturbance in the embraces of his lusts, let them hang by him, and he by them, till they sink him into hell, and lie there as a mountain of lead on him for ever.

(5.) Do you not know, the longer you halt, it will be the harder to come to a point for God? the longer ye hold off from the Lord, you will be the more loth to come away; Prov. vi. 10, "Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep." He that is not fit this day, will be unfitter to-morrow; for lusts, through continuance, grow more and more strong, and the devil, that comes at first alone, afterwards his name is Legion, for they are many. I aver, that it had been telling many of us, that they had

struck the iron many years ago, when it was hotter than it is now.

Lastly, Halt as long as you will, you must not only be determined for the Lord, and against all your lusts, but also you must be joined to the Lord, and separated from them actually, else you are ruined for ever. The case is plain, Mark xvi. 16, "He that believeth not shall be damned."—Ezek. xviii. 30, "Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so iniquity shall not be your ruin."—Matth. xviii. 3, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." So, if you have any mind to be free from the wrath to come, unless you have a mind to take your hazard with your lusts through all eternity, while God is God, to pursue the quarrel for the slight ye put on him, you must come to a point, and be determined for God, and give up with all your lusts.

Now, Sirs, there are two things lying before you this day, of one of which you are to take your choice.

1. You must either give up with God, Christ, heaven, and glory, quit all your part in the covenant of grace, the purchase of Christ, and his death, freely, and betake yourselves to your lusts, idols, and sinful courses, and make the best of them you can to live and die with them. Satan is fond of your making this choice. Or,

2. You must give up with your lusts, idols, and sinful courses, freely quit your part in them, not excepting your darling lust, and betake yourselves to the Lord in his covenant, taking this day God the Father for your Father, God the Son for your Saviour, God the Holy Ghost for your Sanctifier, Christ for your Prophet, to be led by his word and Spirit; Christ for your Priest, to be saved by his obedience and death only; Christ for your King, to be ruled and governed by him according to his will absolutely. The Lord is willing that you make this your choice, and kindly invites the worst of you to it; Rev. iii. 20, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and I will sup with him, and he with me." And ch. xxii. 17, "And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come; and let him that heareth say, Come: and let him that is athirst come; and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." Nay, he commands you to make this choice: 1 John iii. 23, "And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ." And so earnest is he in this invitation, that he will pass all your former slights, if you will but now fall in with this offer: Ezek. xviii. 22, "All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned; in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live." Now, there is the choice in both parts, what say ye to it? Josh. xxiv. 15,

“Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.”—I demand your answer. What answer shall I return?—your final answer, for I cannot say that ever our Master will send me again to you on this errand.—Are there any here,

(1.) Who will give that answer, Jer. ii. 25, “There is no hope; no; for I have loved strangers, and after them I will go.” O Sirs! take your word again, we are loth to carry back that word; why will you die? why will you destroy yourselves? If we saw a cup of poison in your hand, which you would not part with, but would drink, we would flee to you, mix our blood with yours, before you should get it drunk; but what can we do in this case, but cry, O do yourselves no harm! and protest before God, angels, men, and your own selves, that your blood is on your own head.—Are there any here,

(2.) Who will give that answer, Jer. iii. 22, “Behold, we come unto thee, for thou art the Lord our God.”—Job xxxiv. 32, “If I have done iniquity, I will do so no more.” Then, I call heaven and earth to record, you are at a point for our Lord never to go back; that it is an everlasting bargain between God in Christ and you; that he is yours, and you are his; that although this bargain betwixt our Lord and you has been many times back and fore, it is now fully and finally concluded, you are married now, and there is no room for any other suitors. O come, then, to your Lord’s table with a holy boldness, and get the covenant sealed!

Lastly, Is that your answer, Acts xxiv. 25, “Go thy way for this time, when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee?” You say you will advise upon it. I declare we cannot take that answer: our commission does not bear us to indulge you even till to-morrow, in advising upon a matter of such importance: Heb. iv. 7, “To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” Nay, we cannot allow you even another hour or half-hour in hesitation: 2 Cor. vi. 2, “Behold, now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.” Give your answer, therefore, instantly, I peremptorily claim it; if you delay longer, you may be in hell ere to-morrow, nay, next hour, it may be, next moment. What do you hesitate upon?—whether you will obey God or the devil?—whether you will cast the kindled coals of hell out of your bosom, or not?—whether you will travel in that narrow road which leads to life, or in that broad road which will land you in destruction?—in short, whether you will live for ever, or perish eternally? Oh! Sirs, be wise before it be too late, halt no longer, I beseech you, betwixt these two opinions: “To-day if ye will hear his voice; harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, the day of tentation in the wilderness.” When a gracious

God is now calling you, "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die, O house of Israel?" let the echo of your souls, and the answer of your tongues be, "Behold, we come unto thee, for thou art the Lord our God."

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THE SAME SUBJECT CONTINUED.\*

SERMON XXV.

1 KINGS xvi. 21,

*Elijah said, How long halt ye betwixt two opinions?*

IN the ordinance of the Lord's supper, there is to be seen Jacob's ladder, with its foot set on the earth, and the top thereof reaching unto heaven, Gen. xxviii. 12. We trust ye have been essaying to mount it, though perhaps ye are yet not far from the ground. O that ye may have freely entered upon the first step! I must, however, warn you, whoever ye be, that are looking upwards towards the place to which the top reaches, namely, heaven, that there is such a voice to you from heaven in our text, as came to David from the castle of Zion, when he set himself to win it, 2 Sam. v. 6, "Except thou take away the blind and the lame, thou shalt not come in hither." 1st, Unless the blind mind and heart that is still wavering in the choice betwixt the Lord and idols be taken away, and thou canst be determined absolutely and finally for the Lord, ye cannot come in hither. Of this we have discoursed already.†—There is a *second* voice. Except the lame feet whereby one is still going from side to side in practice, betwixt the Lord and idols, be taken away, you cannot come in hither. To this we are now to attend, in considering,

Doctr. II. That an unequal and an unsteady walk, here-away there-away, betwixt the Lord and idols, is an unaccountable and abominable way of walking through the world.

In discoursing from this, it is proposed to shew,

I. What is to be accounted such a walking.

II. The evil of this way of walking.

III. The causes of this unsteady walking; when we shall also point out some remedies against it.

IV. Make some improvement.—I am,

I. To shew what is to be accounted such a walking.

\* This discourse was delivered immediately after the celebration of the Lord's supper, in Maxton, August 3, 1718.

† See page 245.

1. Random-walking is such a walking: Lev. xxvi. 21, "And if ye walk contrary to me, and will not hearken unto me, I will bring seven times more plagues upon you, according to your sins." The original word, "contrary," may be rendered, as by accident, at random, at all adventures. There is a generation that are at best but random-customers to religion, who take no more of it than they readily meet with. Their religion sits so light on them, that in their way through the world they take it as it comes to them. As the fashion of the time turns, they face as the stream runs about. They conform themselves to the taste and humour of whatever company they fall in with: they become a prey to every temptation, and are picked up like straying beasts by the first finder. Beware of this: that day ye get to heaven in this way, God and Baal shall be reconciled. Set up your mark in religion, and press unto it. Lay down a principle for God, and hold by it, however times, companies, or temptations may seduce you: Phil. iii. 15, "I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Acts xi. 23, "And exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they should cleave unto the Lord;" that is, abide by his side with full purpose, laid down and determined beforehand.—I observe,

2. Wavering-walking is such a walking: Heb. x. 23, "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith, without wavering." When men are still unsettled in their way, hither and thither, are wavering in their purposes and practice, one day for God, another for the devil, and their lusts like men in an ague, with their hot and cold fits by turns, at one time destroying what at another time they were building up, they are never fixed. Hence they will be one day at the table of the Lord, another at the table of drunkards. Like water-fowls, sometimes they will be soaring aloft towards heaven in the exercises of religion, and quickly again swimming in their lusts, and over head and ears in the cares, profits, pleasures, and vanities of the world. Sometimes they will appear so serious in religion, that one would think they would never go back again to their sinful courses: anon, they give themselves the swing in their sinful courses, as they would never look back again to religion. Take heed of this; waverers will never get up the hill to Zion: Jam. i. 6, 7, 8, "But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering: for he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways." Go straight forward in the Lord's way, as one that is resolute for God and his way: Prov. iv. 25, 26, 27, "Let thine eyes look right on, and let thy eye-lids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of

thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left, remove thy foot from evil."—I observe,

3. Unequal walking is such a walking : Prov. xxvi. 7, "The legs of the lame are not equal." The parts of the conversation of many answer no better than a long leg and a short one do. In the church they are saints, at home they are devils ; in their profession they are fair, in their practice they are foul and false ; in their words the world is nothing, but in their affection it is their all. Their practice is made up of contradictions. They agree not with themselves, how can they with God ? They pretend piety towards God, yet make no conscience of duty, mercy, and justice towards man : Matth. xxiii. 23, "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye pay tithe of mint, anise, and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith : these ought ye to have done, and not left the others undone." A wide conscience in substantials, and narrow in circumstantials of religion, is a conscience of a profane make. Beware of this ; see the emblem of these folk, Prov. xxvi. 23, "Burning lips, and a wicked heart, are like a potsherd covered with silver dross." The potsherd will be broken in pieces at length. Labour to have your whole conversation of a piece, if ever you would see heaven : Jam. iii. 10, "Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so."—I observe,

4. Partial and divided walking is such a walking : Hos. x. 2, "Their heart is divided." They keep not with one master, but in some things serve the Lord, in other things their own lusts. They would make void the commands of God ; some they will comply with, others they will not regard. They will strain at a gnat in some things, and in others swallow a camel. At a communion, or under a conviction, they say, as in Deut. v. 27, "Speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee, and we will hear it, and do it." But when it comes to a labouring in their work, they will resolve to do, but they cannot : Prov. xx. 4, "The sluggard will not plough, by reason of the cold." They have their particular idols of jealousy, which they can by no means part with. Beware of this ; be universal in your respect to God's commandments, otherwise you will be clothed with shame at length : Psalm cxix. 6, "Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments." The straight soul says, as in ver. 128, "I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right, and I hate every false way."—I shall now go on to shew,

II. The evil of this way of walking. I shall sum up this in these four things :—

1. It is a walking highly dishonourable and offensive to God: Rev. iii. 15, 16, "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." How could an affectionate husband take it, to have his wife gadding after other lovers? And, O how dishonourable is it to God, that those who have given themselves away to him should be found hanging about the doors of the world, and their lusts? Friends' wounds pierce deepest; and therefore many do more dishonour God, and disgrace religion, by their uneven walk, their halting betwixt two opinions, than if they should go over entirely to the devil's side in the world: Ezek. xx. 39, "As for you, O house of Israel! thus saith the Lord God, Go ye, serve ye every one his idols, but pollute ye my holy name no more with your gifts and with your idols."

2. It a walking which is most grievous and offensive to the serious and godly. With what concern does Elijah complain of it here! They are a heavy burden in the ship of the church of God; and the lighter they are in their fleeting and flowing, the heavier their case lies on serious souls: Psalm lv. 12, 13, 14, "For it was not an enemy that reproached me, then I could have borne it; neither was it he that hated me, that did magnify himself against me, then I would have hid myself from him. But it was thou, a man, mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked to the house of God in company." And no wonder, considering that the name of God is blasphemed by reason of such walkers; and they are the worst enemies religion has: Phil. iii. 18, "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ; whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and who mind earthly things." When two armies are in the field, as is the case betwixt Christ and the devil, absolute deserters are dangerous; but such as remain in the camp, yet keep up a correspondence with the enemy, are still more so.

3. It is a walking which is hardening to the wicked: Prov. xxviii. 4, "They that forsake the law, praise the wicked." They betray the cause of religion to them, and open their mouths to blaspheme and reproach the way of God: Rom. ii. 23, 24, "Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles, through you, as it is written." Do you think that your coming to a communion table, your waiting on ordinances, public, private, or secret, will ever commend the way of the Lord to onlookers, while you make not conscience of tender walking in the whole of your conver-

sation, even in your natural and civil actions? Nay, truly, the sinful liberty you take to yourselves, even as others, will make your religion loathsome to them. I have found some have been restrained from the table of the Lord by observing the unsuitable walk of others after a communion; but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed.

*Lastly*, It is a walking which is ruining to one's own soul. The generation that wandered in the wilderness died there; and waverers betwixt the Lord and their idols fall into the mire at length: Hos. vi. 4, 5, "What shall I do unto thee, O Judah? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew, it goeth away. Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of my mouth; and my judgments are as the light that goeth forth." It is to those that are faithful unto the death only that the crown of life is promised, Rev. ii. 10. Instability in the good ways of the Lord vexeth the Holy Spirit; whereupon he departs, then the soul withers, and is cast over the hedge at length. Many walk in a round betwixt their lusts and their duties while they live; and when they go out of the world they are just where they were when they came into it. As they were born in sin, so they die in it, and so tumble down into the pit.—I shall now point out,

III. The causes of this unsteady walking, going from side to side betwixt the Lord and idols; together with the remedies.

1. The want of a right set of the heart at first, is one cause: Psalm lxxviii. 37, "For their heart was not right with him, neither were they stedfast in his covenant." While these in the text had two opinions, and were not determined to one of them, they could not but halt betwixt the two. The heart that is never once freely separate from sin, so as to see it to be an evil, and the greatest evil, and to hate it for itself, that is, for its contrariety to God's holy nature and law, will make at best but a halting professor. If the duties of religion be desirable to them for one reason, the enjoyment of their lusts is so for another; and thus the heart being divided, the life is so too.

In this case the remedy is, to come once freely away to the Lord Christ, from all your lusts and idols: 2 Cor. vi. 17, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you." They who once thus part freely, will never halt again betwixt the two. Though they may have a weak side by reason of indwelling corruption, yet they have a sound side too, that is combating with that weakness: Gal. v. 17, "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would." And they

are in consequence longing for the victory: Rom. vii. 24, "O! wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Unite with Jesus Christ, and you will walk in him; for where he is once freely chosen for a pilot to the ship, the sinner's course through the sea of this world will be completely managed; that soul will never be shipwrecked.

And now, if ye be in earnest not to halt any more, I give you an advice:—As soon as ye get home after this work is over, retire by yourselves, and consider where your weak side lies, what is that lust or lusts that is most likely to draw you over to its side again; and having seen it, consider how your soul stands affected to it, and labour by all means to make sure a final parting with it in your heart; that is, honestly and resolutely before the Lord to give up with it again for ever. And as for the void space which the renouncing that sweet morsel will make in your heart, fill it up with Christ himself, by taking him expressly in the room of that idol: Matth. xiii. 45, 46, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman seeking goodly pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it."

To this some may object, is there any saint in the world that is free of halting? *Ans.* There is a great difference betwixt the Christian's halting through weakness, and the halting through wickedness spoken of in the text, which is really more than halting, properly so called. The one is a halting like him that is lame of one leg, the other like him that is lame of both.—The Christian, whatever weakness he is attended with in his walk, is absolutely determined for God and holiness, in opposition to all his idols: the hypocrite wants this resolution of heart. The former longs, sighs, groans, and strives to get the victory over corruption; is never for truce and reconciliation betwixt the Lord and lusts, but for the extirpation of these lusts. But the latter is at bottom for both together, a reconciliation betwixt them, and cannot think to hold with the Lord without his lusts.—The Christian sinneth not with that full swing of heart the hypocrite doth. The former hath a sound side, a renewed part, which lusteth against the flesh, and so far resists the sway to the weak side; whereas the latter has nothing sound, and so sinneth with full consent of the will, however the conscience may reclaim and reprove.

2. Another cause is, unmortified lusts and light meeting together in the soul. An enlightened conscience puts it forward to God; unmortified, lively, reigning lusts, draw it back again. Thus one is tossed from side to side, as in the case of Pilate and Balaam: Job xxiv. 13, "They are of those that rebel against the light; they

know not the ways thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof." Lusts rise against light, and thrust a man out of the paths thereof. It is with them as with David, in the battle against Absalom. Upon the one hand, it was hard to lose a kingdom: on the other hand, to lose a son: "Therefore deal gently," says he, "with Absalom." Even so here, they are loth to lose their souls, yet loth also to lose their idols. Hence they must do something for each of them.—In this case there is this

REMEDY:—Mortify your lusts, that you may trample on them, and follow the light: Col. iii. 5, "Mortify, therefore, your members which are upon the earth," &c. Prune off these suckers, that ye may have a thriving soul. Deny their cravings, that ye may weaken and starve them. And that ye may be enabled to do this, let your conscience and your heart both together take up their rest in Christ by faith. Know, O sinner! there is enough in Christ for the boundless desires of thy heart, as well as for the cravings of thy conscience: Cant. v. 16, "His mouth is most sweet; yea, he is altogether lovely." Col. ii. 9, 10, "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power."—Here some may reason,

(1.) How can that be? for, alas! there are many desires in my wretched heart, that are of such a carnal sort, that there can be nothing in Christ for them. *Ans.* Our Lord satisfies the desires of poor sinners, by enlarging such of them as are holy, fulfilling these, and extinguishing others of them that are unholy: Psalm lxxxix. 10, "I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt:" "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it." Though thou canst not have in Christ the unworthy thing thy false heart desireth, thou shalt have in him what is a thousand times more desirable; and then the desire of that thing will die away. None complains of the want of candles while the sun shines into the room, for that more than supplies the want of them all; and none will cry, "Who will shew us any good?" when the Lord "lifts up upon them the light of his countenance." A child may be fond of his rattle, and will not part with it; but put a more pleasing thing in his hand, and he will immediately let it go: Matth. xiii. 44, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hid in a field, the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field."—Another may inquire,

(2.) What way shall I take to get Christ to fill my heart? The answer, in a word, is, Believe.—What shall we believe?

(1.) Believe that there is a complete fulness in Christ, sufficient to satisfy the boundless desires of your hearts: Col. ii. 19, "Hold-

ing the head, from which all the body by joints and bands, having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God." He is infinite in perfections; and whatever is desirable in all the creation, is eminently in him as the fountain of all.

(2.) Believe that he, with all his fulness, is offered to you, in the way of exchange with all your lusts and idols. Sincerely consent to the exchange. There is a full Christ before you; and the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life, are with you. Give up with these, as expressly and solemnly as ye can, and take Christ in their room; believing there shall be no missing of them, and looking for the heart-satisfaction in him ye used to seek in them. And believe it is a bargain unalterable for eternity: Matth. xiii. 45, 46; Psalm lxxiii. 25, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee.—God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever."

(3.) When your lusts come back, offering to entertain you as formerly, believe ye have in Christ what is a thousand times better: Psalm lxxxiv. 10, "For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand." Say in your souls, as the olive, Jud. ix. 9, Shall I come down from bread, and lie down to eat husks? Shall I leave the milk and honey, and fill my mouth with gravel-stones? If the lust of vanity say, there is gaiety and finery, the eyes of beholders are fixed on thee; let the soul say, but I have in Christ a never-fading beauty, glorious robes of unspotted righteousness, Christ's love and his Father's, &c. that is solid and substantial, not to be exchanged for the airy nothings of the world's vanity. If the lust of covetousness say, there is a good prize to be had by a very little stretch, let the soul say, but I have riches in Christ, and that without any sting, durable riches and righteousness.

(3.) Another course of this walking is, men's touching but very lightly on religion in its turn, but digging deep in their lusts in their turn: Psalm lxxviii. 18, "And they tempted God in their heart, by asking meat for their lusts." Ver. 36, "Nevertheless, they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongues." They are as it were in jest in the former, but in deep earnest in the latter; they swim like feathers in the waters of the sanctuary, but sink as lead in the mighty waters of their corrupt affections.

In this case, I propose this remedy:—Labour to be experimental Christians: Psalm xxxiv. 8, "O taste and see that the Lord is good." A taste of the transcendent goodness of God, the hidden excellency of religion, would hold you fast to the right side: John

iv. 10, "Jesus answered, and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water." O then press eagerly into the inner court of religion; there are beauties there that will arrest your heart. Labour that you may have your hearts in every duty; break through the shell, till ye come to the kernel. Once make religion your business, it will soon fill your hands, as well as your hearts.—I shall only mention,

4. Another cause of this walking. They would fain be at heaven, but have no heart for the rugged way to it: Mark x. 21, "Then Jesus beholding him, loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest; go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved; for he had great possessions." The sluggard loves the gold, but will not dig for it.

In this case the remedy is, to put on a resolution, a peremptory resolution for God, to cleave to him at any rate, and to pass through the wilderness to the heavenly Canaan, cost what it will: Numb. xiv. 24, "But my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went; and his seed shall possess it." There ye may be, there ye must be, else you are ruined. And there are two things, as to which I would caution you.

(1.) Have you not got that victory over your idols you were expecting? Do not give over, but resolutely continue the struggle, looking to the Lord for strength to accomplish that in which you have engaged: Rom. xvi. 20, "And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly." Have you come to Christ's door, though you apprehend you have got nothing yet? Be peremptorily resolved you will not go back to the door of your lusts, but hang on at his, though you should die at it, and you shall find, as in Cant. iii. 4, "It was but a little that I passed from them, but I found him whom my soul loveth."

(2.) Have you got your feet on the necks of your idols? Pray, do not think the war is over, or that the Egyptian pursuers, who have been sometimes heavy on you, will be seen no more. No, no; the broken forces of corruption will rally again, and the newly-baffled idols will lift up their heads; therefore be on your watch, and prepare to renew the battle.

IV. I am now to make some improvement, which for the present shall only be in an use of exhortation.

Beware of wavering, and study to be stable Christians.—To enforce this, consider,

1. That stability is the ground of fruitfulness: Psalm i. 3, "And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away." A tree, after being lifted, and planted sometimes here, sometimes there, cannot be fruitful: "The rolling stone gathers no fog." Unstable as water, can never prevail. Doubts, fears, and dryness in the soul's case, is a necessary consequence of unsettledness.—Consider,

2. That stability is the beginning of comfortable experiences in religion. We cannot think to thrive in a trade, till we settle to it. A fool is always beginning, leaves off, begins again, and so on; he never brings any thing to perfection.—Consider,

3. That stability is a fence against temptations. The wavering professor is a hopeful prey to temptation. The town that begins to parley, is next door to surrendering. The Jews saw Pilate begin to waver, and then they plied him to condemn Christ, till they carried him off his feet.—Consider,

*Lastly*, That stability is the foundation of serviceableness for God. The vessels of the temple were of gold, silver, brass, &c. but none of glass, no crystal ones; these were too brittle for temple-service. So wavering professors will never be honoured of God to be serviceable for him, but they will do much harm to the way of the Lord.

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CREATION'S GROANS CONSIDERED AND IMPROVED.\*

SERMON XXVI.

ROM. viii. 22,

*For we know that the whole creation groaneth, and travelleth in pain together until now.*

IF we look abroad into the world, we cannot miss to perceive it in a feverish condition; the whole head sick, the whole heart faint; good men and God's good creatures also groaning under a weight of misery. If we look above us into heaven, we cannot but see that it is an holy God who has cast them into, and keeps them in this miserable condition. But withal we may conclude, that it shall not

\* Delivered January, 1716.