

SERMON XI.*

The Unreasonableness of Indetermination in Religion.



1 KINGS, xviii. 21.

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.

IT is the manner of God, before he bestows any signal or remarkable mercy on a people, first to prepare them for it ; and before he removes any awful judgments which he hath brought upon them for their sins, first to cause them to forsake those sins which procured those judgments. We have an instance of this in the chapter wherein is the text.

It was a time of sore famine in Israel. There had been neither rain nor dew for the space of three years and six months. This famine was brought upon the land for their idolatry. But God was now about to remove this judgment ; and therefore, to prepare them for it, sent Elijah to convince them of the folly of idolatry, and to bring them to repentance of it.....In order to this, Elijah, by the command of the Lord, goes and shows himself to Ahab, and directs him to send and gather all Israel to him at Mount Carmel, and all the prophets of Baal, four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the

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groves that eat at Jezebel's table, four hundred, that they might determine the matter and bring the controversy to an issue, whether Jehovah or Baal were God,.... To this end, Elijah proposes, that each should take a bullock, that he should take one, and the prophets of Baal another, that each should cut his bullock in pieces, lay it on the wood, and put no fire under ; and that the God who should answer by fire should be concluded to be God.

The text contains an account of what Elijah said to all the people at their first meeting, and of their silence : " 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." To which the people, it seems, made no reply. In these words, we may observe,

1. How Elijah expostulates with the people about their halting so long between two opinions ; in which expostulation may be observed,

(1.) What the two opinions were, between which they halted, viz. Whether the Lord were God, or whether Baal were God. The case in Israel seems to have been this ; there were some who were altogether for Baal and wholly rejected the true God ; of which number, to be sure, were Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. And there were some among them who were altogether for the God of Israel, and wholly rejected Baal ; as God told Elijah, that " he had yet left in Israel seven thousand that had not bowed the knee to Baal, and whose mouths had not kissed him," 1 Kings xix. 18.

But the rest of the people halted between two opinions. They saw that some were for one, and some for the other, and they did not know which to choose ; and, as is commonly the case when difference of opinion prevails, there were many who had no religion at all ; they were not settled in any thing ; the different opinions prevalent in Israel distracted and confounded them,.... Many who professed to believe in the true God, were yet very cold and indifferent, and many were wavering and unsettled. They saw that the king and queen were for Baal ; and Baal's party was the prevailing party ; but

their forefathers had been for the Lord ; and they knew not which was right. Thus they halted between two opinions.

(2.) In this expostulation is implied the unreasonableness of their thus halting between two opinions....“ How long halt ye between two opinions ? If the Lord be God, follow him ; but if Baal, then follow him.” Which implies that they ought to determine one way or the other.

2. We may observe their silence on this occasion : “ And the people answered him not a word,” as being convicted in their own consciences of the unreasonableness of their being for so long a time wavering and unresolved : They had nothing to reply in excuse for themselves.

DOCTRINE. The unresolvedness of many persons in religion is very unreasonable.

I. PROP. Many persons remain exceedingly undetermined with respect to the things of religion. They are very much undetermined in themselves whether to embrace religion or to reject it....Many who are baptised, and make a profession of religion, and seem to be Christians, are yet in their own minds halting between two opinions : They never yet came fully to a conclusion whether to be Christians or not. They are taught the Christian religion in their childhood, and have the Bible, the word preached, and the means of grace all their days, yet continue, and grow up, and many grow old, in an unresolvedness, whether to embrace Christianity or not ; and many continue unresolved as long as they live.

1. There are some persons who have never come to a settled determination in their own minds, whether or no there be any truth in religion. They hear of the things of religion from their childhood all their days ; but never come to a conclusion in their own minds, whether they be real or fabulous. Particularly, some have never come to any determination in their own minds, whether there be any such thing as conversion. They hear much talk about it, and know that many pretend to be the subjects of it ; but they are never resolved

whether all be not mere designed hypocrisy and imposture, or the mere notions of whimsical persons.

Some never come to any determination whether the Scriptures be the word of God, or whether they be the invention of men ; and whether the story concerning Jesus Christ be any thing but a fable. They fear it is true, but sometimes very much doubt of it. Sometimes, when they hear arguments for it, they give an assent to it, that it is true ; but upon every little objection or temptation arising, they call it in question ; and are always wavering and never settled about it.

So it seems to have been with many of the Jews in Christ's time ; they were always at a loss what to make of him, whether he were indeed the Christ, or whether he were Elias, or one of the old prophets, or a mere impostor. John x. 24, 25. "Then came the Jews round about him, and said unto him, How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly. Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not."....Some have never so much as come to a resolution in their own minds, whether there be a God or not. They know not that there is, and oftentimes very much doubt of it.

2. There are some who never have come to any determination in their own minds whether to embrace religion in the practice of it. Religion consists not merely, or chiefly in theory or speculation, but in practice. It is a practical thing ; the end of it is to guide and influence us in our practice ; and considered in this view, there are multitudes who never have come to a conclusion whether to embrace religion or not.... It is probably pretty general for men to design to be religious some time or other before they die ; for none intend to go to hell. But they still keep it at a distance ; they put it off from time to time, and never come to any conclusion which determines them in their present practice. And some never so much as fix upon any time. They design to be religious some time before they die, but they know not when.

There are many who have always hitherto continued unregarded about the necessity of striving and being earnestly en-

gaged for salvation. They flatter themselves that they may obtain salvation, though they be not so earnestly engaged; though they mind the world and their worldly affairs more than their salvation. They are often told how necessary it is that they make haste and not delay, that they do whatever their hand findeth to do with their might, that they be violent, that a dull, slack way of seeking salvation is never like to be effectual. But of these things they are never thoroughly convinced. Some seem to resolve to be in earnest, and seem to set out with some engagedness of mind; but soon fail, because they have never been fully convinced of the necessity of it.

Many have never come to a determination what to choose for their portion. There are but two things which God offers to mankind for their portion: One is this world, with the pleasures and profits of sin, together with eternal misery ensuing: The other is heaven and eternal glory, with a life of selfdenial and respect to all the commands of God preceding. Many, as long as they live, come to no settled determination which of these to choose. They must have one or the other, they cannot have both; but they always remain in suspense, and never make their choice.

They would fain have heaven and this world too; they would have salvation and the pleasures and profits of sin too. But considering heaven and the world, as God offers them, they will have neither. God offers heaven, only with the selfdenial and difficulty which are in the way to it; and they are not willing to have heaven on these conditions. God offers the world and the pleasures of sin to men not alone, but with eternal misery in connexion with them; and so neither are they willing to have the world. They would fain divide heaven from the holiness and selfdenial which are the way to it, and from the holiness which reigns in it, and then they would be glad to have heaven. They would fain divide sin from hell, and then they would fully determine for ever to cleave to sin.

But God will not make such a division for them. They must have one or the other of these for their portion, as God

offers; and therefore they never make any choice at all.... Indeed they do practically and in effect choose sin and hell. But they do not come to any resolution in their *own minds* which they will have for their portion, whether heaven and holiness, or the world and hell: They are always wavering and halting between two opinions. Sometimes they seem to determine for the one, and sometimes for the other. In times wherein they meet with no difficulty, or temptation, and can, as they say, do their duty without hurting themselves, or much crossing their carnal inclinations, they seem to choose heaven and holiness. At other times, wherein they meet with difficulty in the way of duty, and great temptations of worldly profits or pleasures are laid before them, then they choose the world, and let heaven and holiness alone.... There are among us vast multitudes, before whom these two things have been set hundreds of times, who have never to this day come to a determination which to have.

So they have never yet determined which shall be their master, whether God or mammon. There are but few who have undertaken the service of God, and are come to a resolution and preparedness of mind to serve God and follow Christ at all times, and to whatever difficulties it may expose them. Yet at the same time neither are they determined that they will continue to serve Satan: They are afraid to draw up such a conclusion. Thus many spend away their lives without making their choice, putting that off, though they do in the mean time practically choose the service of Satan. These are the persons of whom the Apostle James speaks in chap. i. 8. "The doubleminded man is unstable in all his ways."

II. To continue thus undetermined and unresolved in the things of religion, is very unreasonable, and that upon the following accounts.

1. The things of religion are things wherein we are to the highest degree interested. The truth or falsehood of the doctrines of religion concerns us to the highest degree possible. It is no matter of indifference to us whether there be a God

or not; or whether the scriptures be the word of God; or whether Christ be the son of God; or whether there be any such thing as conversion. It makes infinite odds to us whether these things be so or not. Therefore we are under the greatest obligation in point of interest to resolve in our minds whether they be true or false. They who are undetermined whether there be any truth in religion, and are contented to be so, not inquiring, nor thoroughly using the means to be determined, act very unreasonably. They remain in doubt whether there be any such thing as an heaven or hell; are quiet and easy to continue ignorant in this matter; are not engaged in their minds to come to a determination; do not search and inquire what arguments there are to prove any such things; nor diligently weigh and consider the force of them; but busy their minds about other things of infinitely less importance; and act as if they thought it did not much concern them, whether there be a future and eternal state.

If they think that there is not, yet it is a matter of so great importance, that no wise man would rest until he had satisfied himself; because if there be such a future state as the scriptures tell us of, then we must have our part in it, either in a state of eternal rewards, or in a state of eternal punishment. So it is no matter of indifference to us what we have for our portion, whether this world with hell, or a life of holiness and selfdenial with heaven. These opposite portions relate not merely to a few days in this world, but they relate to eternity. It is infinite madness therefore not to come to a determination.

So it is no matter of indifference what master we serve, whether God or mammon; or what interest we will pursue, whether our temporal or eternal interest; or which we prefer, the commands of God, or our pleasures, our ease and convenience. Doubtless it will make a vast odds one way or the other. We ought therefore to come to some determination which we will choose.

2. God hath made us reasonable creatures, and capable of rationally determining for ourselves. God hath made us ca-

capable of a good acquaintance with those things which do especially concern our interest. Doubtless God hath made man capable of discovering the truth in matters of religion, of coming to a good determination in these questions, whether the scriptures be the word of God, whether there be a future state, and the like. The resolution of these questions, which it so much concerns us to determine, is not above our capacities. God hath not set these things beyond the extent of our faculties.

So God hath made us capable of making a wise choice for ourselves, as to the life which we shall choose to lead. He hath given man so much understanding, as to make him capable of determining which is best; to lead a life of selfdenial and enjoy eternal happiness, or to take our swing in sinful enjoyments and burn in hell forever. The question is of no difficult determination. It is so far from being a matter too hard for our reason, that the reason of a child is sufficient to determine this matter. Therefore men in remaining undetermined in these matters, do not act as reasonable creatures, but make themselves like "the horse and the mule, which have no understanding," Psalm xxxii. 9.

3. God puts into our hands an happy opportunity to determine for ourselves. What better opportunity can a man desire to consult his own interest, than to have liberty to choose his own portion? God setteth life and death before us. Deut. xxx. 19. "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that thou and thy seed after thee may live." See also Ezek. xviii. 31, 32, and chap. xxxiii. 11. What better opportunity can we desire for securing to ourselves the greatest good, than to have eternal life and unchangeable happiness set before us, and offered to our choice? Therefore those who neglect coming to a resolution, act unreasonably, because they stand so much in their own light, and miss so glorious an opportunity.

4. The things among which we are to make our choice are but few in number; there are but two portions set before

us, one of which must be our portion; either life or death, either blessing or cursing; either a life of universal and persevering obedience with eternal glory; or a worldly, carnal, wicked life, with eternal misery. If there were many terms in the offer made us, many things of nearly an equal value, one of which we must choose, to remain long in suspense and undetermined would be more excusable; there would be more reason for long deliberation before we should fix. But there are but two terms, there are but two states in another world, in one or the other of which we must be fixed to all eternity.

And there are but two states in this world, a state of sin, and a state of holiness, a natural state, and a converted state. There is but one way in which we can come to life, which renders the determination of reason much the easier. There are but two masters, to one of which we must be reputed the servants, Baal and Jehovah, God and mammon: There are but two competitors for the possession of us, Christ and the devil. There are but two paths, in one of which you are to travel, either in the strait and narrow way which leadeth unto life, or the broad way which leadeth unto destruction.

This shows the unreasonableness of those who live under light, and have the offers of the gospel made to them, and yet remain from year to year unfixed and undetermined, halting between two opinions.

5. God hath given us all needed helps to determine us. We have all needed helps to determine our understandings, as to the truth of the things of religion, as whether there be a God, whether the scriptures be the word of God, whether there be a future state, &c. We are not left in the dark as to these things, as the poor heathen are, who are under great disadvantages to come to the knowledge of the truth, though they be not under an impossibility, *for they may haply feel after God and find him*, Acts xvii. 27. But we have a clear sunshine to guide us, we have a particular description of those things which are set before us for truth, and have great opportunity to examine them. The scripture lies open before

us, and all the doctrines of the gospel are particularly set forth, with the reasons on which their evidence is founded. We may search and try their force and sufficiency, as we will.

We have great helps to a wise and rational determination in our choice ; to determine whether it be best for us to choose a life of sin or a life of holiness, the service of God or the service of Baal. We have very plainly set before us the advantages of both sides ; the loss and gain are particularly stated. Christ hath dealt by us faithfully, and hath told us what we shall get, and what we shall lose, by being his followers. He hath also told us what we shall get, and what we shall lose by a life of sin. He hath not dealt by us deceitfully. He hath not pretended greater advantages in godliness than there really are, nor greater disadvantages or dangers in sin. John xiv. 2. " In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you."

He hath told us plainly that we must take up the cross daily and follow him ; that we must hate father and mother, and wife and children, and brethren and sisters, and our own life also, in order to become his disciples ; and that we must cut off our right hands, and pluck out our right eyes, in order to enter into heaven. Thus we have a fair opportunity to count the cost on both sides, and are directed so to do ; Luke xiv. 28. How unreasonable therefore is it for men who have all these helps and advantages, to remain in suspense, and to come to no conclusion whether they will be Christians or heathens, whether they will be for God or the devil ; though they have lived under the preaching of the word and offers of the gospel for many years.

6. We have no reason to expect to be under better advantages to determine hereafter than we are now. We never shall have a clearer revelation of gospel truth ; never shall have the advantages and disadvantages of both sides more plainly set before us, than they are already in the word of God ; nor are we ever like to be under better advantages to know what will be best for us, and most for our interest. Those therefore who delay, gain nothing by their de-

lays, but give Satan more opportunity to darken their minds, to deceive them, and lead them astray in their choice. Therefore their delay of coming to a resolution is unreasonable.

7. If they come not to a determination in this life, God will determine for them, and appoint them their portion with the wicked. If sinners, by refusing to choose either life or death, either heaven or hell, could thereby avoid both, or if in this case the matter would remain undetermined till they should determine it; the folly and unreasonableness of delaying a determination would not be so great. But that is not the case; if they go on halting between two opinions, God will determine for them, and that quickly; he will determine where their portion shall be, viz. among the unbelievers, in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone forever. God will not wait upon them always, to see what they will choose; but he will put an issue to the matter by his unalterable sentence. Therefore it becomes all, if they are afraid to have their lot assigned them in hell, to come soon to a determination.

8. Delay in this case is unreasonable, because those who delay know not how soon the opportunity of choosing for themselves will be past. This opportunity will last no longer than life; when once life is past, they will no more have the offer made them; the sentence will be past; the matter will be issued.

Those who delay their choice in this world will be glad to choose afterwards; then they will not be at all at a loss which to choose; they will be able easily to determine. The judgments of sinners who are departed this life, are soon resolved whether there be any truth in religion or not; they can soon determine which is best and most eligible, a life of obedience and selfdenial, with heaven for a reward, or a life of irreligion and sin, with hell for a punishment. Now they no longer halt between two opinions; but it is too late, their opportunity is past; they are ready too late. They would give all the world for another opportunity to choose; they would then soon come to a determination. But it will not be granted them.

APPLICATION.

1. Let this put every one upon examining himself, whether or no he have ever yet come to a full determination in the affair of religion.

FIRST. Inquire whether or no you have ever yet come to a full determination with respect to the truth of the things of religion. Have you ever been fully convinced? Is it a question which has been answered and determined with you, whether there be a future state; or does it yet remain a question with you unresolved? Are you not yet to seek whether there be any future state, and whether or no the story about Jesus Christ be any more than a fable? Here I desire you to note two things.

1. If the main reason why you assent to the truth of religion be that others believe so, and you have been so instructed from your childhood; you are of those with whom the truth of religion yet remains undetermined. Tradition and education will never fix and settle the mind in a satisfactory and effectual belief of the truth of religion. Though men, taking religion upon trust, may seem to give a full assent to the truth of religion, and not to call it in question; yet such a faith will not stand a shock; a temptation easily overthrows it: The reason of man, in time of trial, will not rest on so poor evidence as that.

There are multitudes who seem to grant the truth of religion, with whom the main foundation of their faith is the tradition of their fathers, or the profession of their neighbors; and it is to be feared, it is so with many who count themselves good Christians. But as to all such persons as never have seen any other evidence to satisfy them, either of the truth or falsehood of religion, they are they that halt between two opinions. The same may be said of those who are unstable in

their disposition with regard to Christ or the things which he taught.

2. If you are fully come to a determination concerning the things of religion, that they are true, they will be of weight with you above all things in the world. If you be really convinced that these things are true, that they are no fable, but reality, it is impossible but that you must be influenced by them above all things in the world; for these things are so great, and so infinitely exceed all temporal things, that it cannot be otherwise. He that really is convinced that there is a heaven and hell, and an eternal judgment; that the soul, as soon as parted from the body, appears before the judgment seat of God; and that the happiness and misery of a future state is as great as the scripture represents it; or that God is as holy, just and jealous, as he hath declared concerning himself in his word; I say, he that is really convinced and hath settled it with himself that these things are certainly true; will regard them and be influenced by them above all things in the world. He will be more concerned by far how he shall escape eternal damnation, and have the favor of God and eternal life, than how he shall get the world, gratify the flesh, please his neighbors, get honor, or obtain any temporal advantage whatsoever. His main inquiry will not be, what shall I eat, and what shall I drink, &c. but he will seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Examine yourselves therefore by this: Are not your hearts chiefly set upon the world, and the things of it? Is it not more your concern, care and endeavor to further your outward interest, than to secure an interest in heaven? And is not this the very reason that you have never seen the reality of eternal things?

SECONDLY. Inquire whether you have ever yet come to a determination about religion with respect to the practice of it; whether you have chosen heaven with the way to it, viz. the way of obedience and selfdenial, before this world and the ways of sin; whether you have determined upon it as most

eligible, to devote yourselves to the service of God. Here I shall mention three or four things which are signs that men halt between two opinions in this matter.

1. To put off duty till hereafter. When persons love to keep their duty at a distance, engage not in it for the present, but choose to keep at a little distance from it; when they think of engaging in religion in better earnest in a little time, when they shall so and so be under better conveniences for it, but do it not now, do not make haste without delay; when they are very good intenders, concerning what they will do tomorrow, but very poor performers today; when they say, as Felix, "Go thy way for this time, when I have a convenient season I will call for thee;" when these things are so, it is a sign that they halt between two opinions, and have never as yet come to a full determination with respect to the practice of religion. Those that have once fully determined that religion is necessary and eligible, will not desire to put it off, but will make it their present and immediate business.

2. It is a sign of the same thing when persons are strict and conscientious in some things, but not in all, not universal in their obedience; do some duties, but live in the omission of others; avoid some sins, but allow themselves in others; are conscientious with respect to the duties of worship, public and private, but not in their behavior to their neighbors; are not just in their dealings, nor conscientious in paying their debts; nor do to others as they would that they should do to them; but have crooked, perverse ways in their dealings among mankind.

The same may be said when they are just in their dealings and trade with men, but are not conscientious in other things; indulge sensual appetites, drink to excess, or allow themselves in wanton practices: Or are honest and temperate, but licentious in using their tongues, backbiting and reproaching their fellow men, 2 Tim. iii. 6, 7.

3. It is a sign that you halt between two opinions, if you sometimes are wont to be considerably engaged in religion, but at other times neglect it; sometimes forming a resolution to be

in good earnest, then dropping it again ; sometimes seeming to be really engaged in seeking salvation, and very earnest in religious duties ; at other times wholly taken up about the things of the world, while religion is neglected, and religious duties are omitted.

These things show that you are yet unsettled, have never yet come to a full determination concerning religion, but are halting between two opinions, and therefore are thus unstable in all your ways, and proceed thus by fits and starts in religion, James 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 doubleminded man is unstable in all his ways." If your determination were fixed in religion, you would be more steady in your practice.

4. It is a sign that you are halting between two opinions, if it be your manner to balk your duty whenever any notable difficulty comes in the way, considerably cross to your interest, or very inconsistent with your ease or convenience, or your temporal honor. Whatever zeal you may seem to have, whatever concern about the things of religion, and however strict you be in ordinary, you have never, if this be your manner, come to a full determination ; have never fully made choice of religion and the benefits of it for your only portion ; and at best have got no further than King Agrippa, who was almost persuaded to be a Christian, Acts xxvi. 28. You are in the state of the stony ground hearers, you have no root in yourselves, and like a tree without root, are easily blown down by every wind.

II. I shall conclude with an earnest exhortation to all, no longer to halt between two opinions, but immediately to come to a determination whether to be Christians or not. Let me insist upon it, that you now make a choice, whether you will have heaven, with a life of universal and persevering obedience for your portion ; or hell, with a life spent in the pursuit of this world. Consider those things which have been said,

shewing the unreasonableness of continuing in such irresolution about an affair of infinite importance to you, and as to which you have so short an opportunity to make your choice. Consider two things in addition to what hath been already said.

1. Those who live under the gospel, and thus continue undetermined about religion, are more abominable to God than the heathen. God had rather that men should either be Christians or downright heathens. He hates those persons who continue from year to year, under the calls, and warnings, and instructions, and intreaties of God's word ; who yet can be brought to nothing ; who will come to no determination at all ; will neither be Christians nor heathens. These are they who are spoken of in 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 month." Ezek. xx. 39. "As for you, O house of Israel, thus saith the Lord God, Go ye, serve ye every one his idols, and hereafter also, if ye will not hearken unto me ; but pollute ye my holy name no more with your gifts, and with your idols." These are they spoken of in 2 Tim. iii. 7. Ever learning and never coming to the knowledge of the truth."

2. If you still refuse to come to a determination whether to be Christians or not, how just will it be, if God shall give you no further opportunity ! If you refuse to make any choice at all ; and after all that hath been done to bring you to it, in setting life and death, so often before you, in calling and warning you, if you will not come to a determination, how just will it be, if God shall wait no longer upon you, if he shall, by his unalterable sentence, determine the case himself ; if he shall fix your state with the unbelievers, and teach you the truth and eligibleness of religion, by sad and fatal experience, when it will be too late for you to choose your portion, and the offer will be no more made you !