

Halting Between Two Opinions

by Catherine Booth

The sermon calls on listeners to make a decision between serving God and serving the world, and warns of the consequences of halting between two opinions.

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:21, Proverbs 4:14, Matthew 6:24, Hebrews 3:15, James 4:8

Topics: "Spiritual Decision", "Eternal Consequences"

Description

Catherine Booth preaches about the importance of making a decisive choice between serving God or following worldly idols, using the story of Elijah confronting the people of Israel who were wavering between worshiping God and Baal. She emphasizes the consequences of influencing others towards sin and rebellion, highlighting the need for courage and boldness in standing for the truth. Catherine urges the listeners to consider the urgency of their spiritual decision, as halting between two opinions spiritually leads to a dangerous downward progression towards sin and eternal damnation.

Transcript

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.'

You who are familiar with this history will remember that Ahab was one of the worst kings that ever sat on the throne of Israel. He was the son and the grandson of idolatrous kings; and for fear he would not be able to carry out his wicked intentions sufficiently by himself, he married a heathenish and idolatrous woman, and by her help he managed to spread the apostasy almost over the entire nation of Israel. We do not wonder we read in 2 Kings xvii. 33, that they feared the Lord and served their own gods, for these were poor heathen colonists from Assyria. But Israel was a nation professedly worshipping Jehovah. And although no doubt Ahab and his wife intended utterly to subvert the worship of the true God, and to put that of Baal in its place; they could not, they dare not aim to do this all at once, and so they supplemented the worship of God by the worship of Baal. They built a house for Baal, planted a grove, and established his worship alongside the worship of the God of Israel, and they succeeded in inducing the majority of the nation to follow them.

Alas! alas! This is generally the case when those in high places give their influence on the wrong side and against God. What an awful reckoning-day is coming for wicked kings and rulers, in fact for all people in places of influence and authority who use it against God! It will be bad enough for a man to have to

answer for the damnation of his own soul; but, Oh! what will it be to have to answer for the damnation of thousands of others? You who are influencing others--your wives, your children, your husbands, your friends, your servants, those who live in the same house with you--there is a reckoning-day coming, and an awful reckoning-day it will be.

Well, this king and queen succeeded in instituting this heathen religion in Israel; they set up this idol Baal alongside the temple of the God of Israel, and induced nearly the whole nation to bow down to it. They had got idolatry, as they thought, firmly established, and were eating and drinking and making merry over the conquest, when down drops Elijah on the scene, as though he had fallen from Heaven. This man, dressed in goat's hair, with a leather girdle about him, a true, courageous prophet of the Lord of hosts, faces Ahab as none but one sent of God dare, and he says, 'As the Lord liveth'--mark the allusion, your Baal is a dead god--'there shall be neither dew nor rain in Israel these years, but according to my word'; 'and I stake the truth of my testimony on His life; if He lives, it shall be accomplished'; and then he disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared. The Lord had provided a hiding-place for His servant. He sends him to the brook Cherith, there to be fed by a miracle, while He comes out of His place to chastise this idolatrous, backsliding, rebellious people. Perhaps the Lord wished to spare Elijah the scenes he would have had to witness, or He foresaw that this grim tyrant would be everlastingly harassing him and trying to slay him. Whichever way it was, God hid him; but when the famine began to make its appearance, then they began to search for Elijah.

I wonder what Ahab wanted with Elijah. His guilty conscience told him that that man had the key of the clouds, that that man was nearly associated with this dread calamity, and so he sends out messengers to find him--as Obadiah tells Elijah, 'there is no nation or kingdom, whither my lord hath not sent to seek thee: and when they said, He is not there; he took an oath of the kingdom and nation, that they found thee not.'

But he could not find him. The man whom God hides, the Devil will never find, until God gives him permission, and then he will not be able to touch a hair of his head. How safe are they who are in the keeping of Elijah's God! How independent they are of men's opinions and threatenings! The famine spreads desolation all over the land, until there is great scarcity of food for man and beast, and the king sends Obadiah to find out the little rivulets that might be left, or the springs that are not dried up, so as if possible to find a little green stuff for the cattle; and as Obadiah proceeds on 'his way, Elijah meets him, and says, 'Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here,' and Obadiah replies, 'Thou sayest, Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here. And it shall come to pass, as soon as I am gone from thee, that the Spirit of the Lord shall carry thee whither I know not; and so when I come and tell Ahab, and he cannot find thee, he shall slay me.'

But Elijah gives him the assurance he needed. 'As the Lord of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto him today.'

Here is courage--the true courage of one whom God has sent. 'I am not afraid of thy master; I am not afraid of his dungeons or his blocks. I am going to show myself to him.' He says, moreover, 'Go and tell him Elijah, is here'--not that Elijah is coming, but here--'if He wants me, he can come and find me. I shall not run away for fear of him'; and so Obadiah goes and tells Ahab. What was it that drove Ahab to meet Elijah? It might be he was impelled by hope; it might be he was driven by fear; but he had to go and meet him. The famine had brought things to a climax. He must meet with this man of God. He must try either to wrench this power from him by threatening, or he must persuade and entreat him. He goes to meet him.

Can you not imagine you see them--the one the Devil's representative, the other the representative of the God of Israel? The moment Ahab's eyes fall on Elijah, he begins with a false accusation--'Art thou he that troubleth Israel?' It is always so with unrepenting, rebellious sinners. They charge the consequences of their sins upon God's faithful servants who are sent to rebuke and reprove them; they say, 'Oh! let me alone. You are always foretelling evil things. You are always denouncing people. You are a troubler of Israel.' But Elijah returns the charge, and says, 'I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and thou hast followed Baalim.' He puts the controversy on its true footing; he traces the calamity to its real source--their idolatry, backsliding, and rebellion. There he stands uttering the truth with all the courage and boldness of a lion, because he feels he has the signet of the King of kings to his utterance. 'It is thou and thy father's house that have troubled Israel'; and then he assumes the part of the king, turns the tables upon him, and commands him 'Now go.' Oh! the authority which the possession of the Spirit of God gives to His servant, and what he dares do with that Spirit in him! Now, he says, 'Send, and gather to me all Israel unto Mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal.'

'What impudence!' Ahab might have said. 'Do you suppose I am going to gather the prophets of my favourite god? Who are you that you should command this?' But there is not a word of it. Poor trembling coward! his conscience echoed back the accusation of Elijah. He knew he was guilty, and that their sins and their iniquities were the cause of this visitation, and he wanted rain. He wanted the ground softened and made fruitful; he wanted crops for his household, and people, and cattle, and he dared not deny Elijah's word or resist his authority. So he went and obeyed, and he gathered the backsliding nation together on the sides of Carmel. There was no building in Israel large enough to have contained that vast assembly. When thus gathered, Elijah comes and stands in the midst of them, and says, 'How long halt ye?' There they were, that vast multitude, vacillating, halting between the service of God on the one hand and the service of Baal on the other. Their king and queen, the favours of the court, and perhaps a great many of their earthly advantages and possessions, depended on their choice. They were looking at Baal on the left, hand, and at the claims of the God of Israel on the right; and just as they were swaying to and fro like a field of corn in the wind, Elijah cries, 'Now then, "choose ye whom ye will serve." . . . "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him: but if Baal, then follow him." I demand a decision. I demand a settlement of this controversy.'

I just want you to notice one or two things in the state here depicted as typical of the condition of many here today. Look at what is implied in halting, because it is equally applicable to you as to idolatrous Israel. What does it mean, this halting between the service of God and of Baal, or the service of God and of anything else--self, the world or Satan in any form he may assume? It means to hesitate in any course of conduct which we have been pursuing; to look at the reasons on the right hand and on the left; to debate in our minds the wisdom or rightness of two courses of conduct, and to compare them one with the other.

Now these Israelites were called on to decide between the claims of God and the claims of Baal. You are called on to decide between the claims of God as established and put forth in the death of His Son, and the service of the world, the flesh, and the Devil, which is your Baal. And as Elijah came and demanded of these people to whom he had previously ministered and whose prophet he was, so I come and demand in the name of the Lord God of Elijah from you who have received my messages during the last three months, whom the Spirit of God has made to look at them and ponder them--I demand of you a settlement of this controversy. Now, 'how long halt ye?' Mind, I am not speaking figuratively--God forbid. If I did not believe that I have as truly brought God's messages to you as Elijah did to the Jews, I should never have

stood here. I fear--nay, I expect--that the Salvation of some souls depends on the way they decide with respect to the message this afternoon. Oh, may God the Spirit help you to decide the right way!

To help you to this decision I want you to note, first, that there is a sense in which we never halt--never stand still. In fact, there is a sense in which nothing stands still. But this is specially true of the world of mind and spirit. Once launched into being, sinner, you never stand still. You must increase, grow bigger in the capacity and enjoyment of good, or in the capacity for and realization of evil for ever and ever. It is a beautiful thought to the righteous, that, once launched on the wave of everlasting progress, we shall stand still no more, but go on growing, and growing, and growing, until, as the Saviour said, we shall become as gods in our capacity for Holiness and bliss for ever. We know not indeed what we shall be. God Himself could not explain it, but we shall be like Him. Oh, how beautiful! It is worth holding on for, worth suffering for, worth fighting for, worth dying for. This path of eternal progress once gained, if you will but hold fast and endure to the end of this mortal strife, on you go for ever!

But, Oh! it is an awful thought for the sinner. It is equally true of you. You will have to go on in spite of yourself. You will have to grow bigger in sin and likeness to the Devil. Ah! sinner, stop and think how true this has been of you IN THE PAST. Look back at yourself when you were a little boy of ten years old. 'Ah!' you say, 'I was a naughty boy then.' Very likely; but if any one had told you that in five or ten years' time you would have been as big a sinner as you are today, what would you have said? Oh! how you have grown! How the Devil congratulates himself on your rapid and awful progress! You never thought you would get so big in evil. You never thought you would be such a sinner. Then reasoning by analogy from the past to the future--thus you must grow for ever. There is no stopping-place for you. Oh, yes, THERE IS ONE, thank God. There was one for these Israelites, though they had entered on the downward path of backsliding, rebellion, and idolatry, and they would have gone on to utter destruction; but, bless His name, in His beneficence He said, 'I will not let them go right over the boundary-line without one effort.' He steps down from Heaven to earth on to the top of Carmel, and puts His hand on them, and says, 'Halt! stand still! listen! think! reflect!' and by the mouth of Elijah He made them consider. Then, when He had convinced them, He said, 'How long will you be before you settle on the right side--for Me, for righteousness, for Salvation, for Heaven? How long halt ye?'

Ah! there is one stopping-place for you, and only one. His infinite love could not let you go down to everlasting damnation without giving you a chance, and so He reared the cross, and stretched on it that broken, bleeding Victim, and there is the stopping-place for every poor sinner. And now, as Elijah called to those Jews from Mount Carmel, God calls you from Calvary, and says, 'Man, stop! halt in your downward course!' and from the broken, bleeding body of His Son He cries aloud to you, 'Turn ye, turn ye; for why will ye die? Come unto Me and live.'

There is, then, one stopping-place; but if you get finally past that, there is no more stopping for you for ever. The very law of your being will force you on and force you down. There will never come a time when you can turn round and say, 'Well, now, I think I'm bad enough. I think I have gone far enough in the practice of iniquity and rebellion against God. I think I shall turn round now and stop'--never, you will have to go on growing in the capacity for evil, and enduring the consequence of evil, till you become a very devil! You can never stop any more. Is it not true? Does not your reason tell you it is true? Does not your conscience tell you it is true? Does not the Spirit of God thunder in your ears--'Amen?' You know it is true--no more stopping!

Oh! my sinful friend--you who are halting, you to whom the voice of God is raised in your wild career, stop and listen. What are you going to do this afternoon? How long halt ye? Will you settle this controversy on the right side, and, coming out of the downward path, start on the everlasting course of growth in righteousness and blessing for ever, or will you go on halting until GOD SETTLES THE CONTROVERSY FOR YOU? What will you do? How long halt ye?

I want you to note, secondly, that the fact that you halt proves that God has put His hand upon you.

The Devil never lets men halt if he can help it. That is the last thing he would ever think of doing. He keeps them so fully occupied, and so on the drive for the things of the world and of the flesh, that they have not time to halt. You can hardly get them to listen to you a minute together. He says, 'If I let them halt, I'm done for. If I let them listen and take in the messages that woman is giving, they may be saved'; and so he pushes in business, pleasure, family, consequences, costs, or anything at hand. You know he has tried to keep some of you away with all his might. You halted up to the coming in at the door--whether you should come in or no; but the Spirit of God had got hold of you. And you know that as fast as I am pushing in truth at one ear, he is pushing it out at the other, with his infernal reasonings. He never lets men halt. YOU would NEVER HAVE PULLED UP A SINGLE MOMENT on your way to perdition, if the great Almighty God had not come down and pulled you up. It is not in me. Don't give me the credit. It is not in this book; it is not in Heaven; it is not in earth; it is not in Hell. It is not in all the angels of God to make a sinner halt--NOTHING BUT THE HOLY GHOST could do this. HE has pulled you up. He has faced you about. He has made you stop. He has startled and alarmed you. It is God, and God alone, who has done it! Therefore, I beseech YOU--MIND. Alas! Sinners deal with us and with our truth as if it were a fiction. All that we can do, our very tears and entreaties, they treat its if it were a drama. They will not hear; they will not believe. They would not when He sent the Son Himself, and they will not when He sends His Elijahs, His messengers; but Oh! my friend, my soul for yours, there is an hour coming when you will know that a prophet has been amongst you. There is an hour coming when you will know it was God who pulled you up in this hall, and that you had a chance for your soul. As the Lord God of Elijah liveth, you shall know that it was He, whatever you say now. Oh, that He may help you to know it in this your day of visitation! Oh, that you may know it, and listen and submit, and get saved! Then the end will be answered, and we shall have such a shout when we get to glory. But if you forget everything else, don't forget that it is God who is crying, "How long halt ye!"

Man, mind how you treat Him; if you insult Him and throw back His invitation, and settle the wrong way, in all probability you will never stop any more, but you will drive harder and harder down to Hell! I believe it is certain of some of you, unless you settle at once to be saved. Then how long halt ye How long will you risk damnation?

Then ask yourself, How has God stopped you, and why have you halted? Oh! He has opened your eyes, and you are like Balaam's ass--you dare not go forward. You would fain, but you dare not. There is a drawn sword in the way. God has opened your eyes. He has made you see the horrors of a guilty soul upon a dying bed. You see it ahead of you. He has uncovered the pit, and you have had a lookdown. He shows what before you were blind to and could not see. You got up and shook yourself, and said, 'It is a nightmare'; but, no, it was God uncovering the pit. He has made you look in. He has opened your ears, and the air has been sonorous with sounds from other worlds: over and over again, the dying exhortations and warnings of that Christian father, and the last beseeching entreaty of that sainted mother, and the little childish accents of that flowered that He took from your hearth. You have heard it by night and by day, and you have shaken yourself, and said, 'I will not hear it,' but it has come again and again. Why?

Because HE HAS OPENED YOUR EARS. Six months ago you did not hear it. For years it has been drowned with the din and strife of outer life, and you have plugged your ears that you should not hear. But God has opened them, and made you hear. Ah! some of you have heard the dying wailings of doomed companions. You know where they are. You know how far you went with them in the downward track, and where you had to part, and you know how they went over the brink. Now God has met you here. It has not been my poor words. It has not been anything you have read. It has not been any friends you have met. It is the Holy Ghost--God--who has opened your ears. How much longer, man, halt ye? Will nothing but the flames of Hell do?

Then I want to note, lastly, that the FURTHER YOU GO THE FASTER, and the less possibility there is of your stopping. Like a stone downhill the momentum of the past will push you on in spite of yourself when you get near the bottom. The weight of the guilty deeds of the past will come behind you like an incensed rider, pushing you down, down, down; and the lower you go, and the further you go, the faster you go. Oh! my young friends, my dear lads, listen. There is many an old man here would say, 'Amen,' if he dare. He would say, 'It is true, my lad. You get out of the way of destruction.' Then come to the cross early; say, 'The Lord, He is God, and I will serve Him.' Sinner, every day you live you are heaping up the guilty deeds of the past to crush you lower and lower, till you get into the pit that has no bottom. Don't believe the Devil. Don't believe his agents. Don't believe evil books. Don't read them. Don't have anything to do, with anything that lessens sin in your estimation, and makes it look a trifling thing. Keep out of its rapids. It leads down to the chambers of death--death, everlasting death. My friend, will you stop this afternoon? The black flag of God's vengeance is waving over you night and day while you are out of the path that leads to life. Out of Christ, He is a consuming fire. Oh! I know the namby-pamby religionists of this day have made Him into a God like themselves, winking at iniquity; but He will show them in that day that to all iniquity He is still a consuming fire. He will have NOTHING TO DO WITH SIN, but will put it into the charnel-house which He has prepared for the corrupt of His universe. He is a pure and a holy God. The flood of His wrath is coming, and if you don't make haste it will overwhelm you for ever, and, Oh! the bell of your doom may ring any moment.

How little those people in Percy Street, hard by, knew what was in store for them! That gentleman walking up Percy Street little expected that his doom was going to be pronounced in a moment. How little those people in the railway carriage, when the trains clashed, expected that, in one instant, when they looked not for it, their doom would be fixed! My friends, how long halt ye.

And just remember one more thought, that the halting of the soul is not like the halting of the body, in this respect--really and truly you never stand still. Though God has pulled you up in the way to destruction, and made you listen, and is arguing with you, and you, as it were, stand thinking and considering which way you shall go, you are going, going, going, all the time. Oh! it would be well for some of you to look back and think. It does people good to stop and realize how OLD THEY ARE, and think when God first pulled them up, and how long it is since they began to halt. Angels are frightened to look at it. Devils are glad to look at it: and if you look at it, perhaps you will get frightened like the angels. How long? Methinks the angel is sounding it over this congregation this afternoon--HOW LONG halt ye? In a physical halting, as at the junction of two roads, for instance, a man may stand and argue which he shall take, but while he does so he is making no progress on either. He is not going in the wrong direction, and thus going further away from the right; he is simply standing still. But it is not so spiritually would God it were, I was going to say; it would not be so serious; but while you are halting spiritually, you are being hurried on as fast to destruction as ever.

TIME is carrying you on. You are like a man in a boat on a placid stream, at the end of which the rapids are falling. You lie on your oars, and the boat is gliding down so gently that you do not perceive the motion, and you are saying all the time, 'Shall I pull up the stream or down?' and the flowers are blooming on the banks, and it may be gay companions are calling to you, and you are whistling and singing, and it is like a May-day as you glide down; but you are going down, down all the while, and the rapids are just below. Ah! there is many a poor soul drifting to damnation thus. There is many a poor soul allows itself just carelessly to drift down to the rapids of eternal death that never meant it. Oh! there are some old men in this hall, and old women, who have been drifting, drifting, drifting, till they are nearly gone; and there are some young ones, too, who, perchance, are just as near the rapids, for, in this race, it does not go by age. They are simply sitting on their oars, drifting. 'Oh!' they say, 'I don't intend to go down. Not likely, ME! I had a Christian father and a praying mother, and I have been hearing sermons all my life. Me! not likely. I don't intend to go down. I shall turn round and pull, by and by, in the right direction'; and while the words are in his mouth he is on the rapids--an accident, a fever, the breaking of a blood-vessel, or he drops down of heart disease, and he is gone, and his friends lift up their hands in horror and say, 'Why, have you not heard the news?' 'What news?' 'Mr. So-and-so was found dead in his bed yesterday morning'; or, 'Mr. So-and-so was walking down Percy Street, and there was an explosion, and all I saw of him was that he was lifted some fourteen feet in the air, and he fell down speechless dead.' Don't such cases reach us by almost every post? Don't the newspapers chronicle them almost every day and hour? These poor souls were in the rapids, and before they knew it they were gone.

Now, how long--HOW LONG? The Lord help you to turn the prow of your boat this afternoon, and take to your oars while there is a chance. The Lord help you to turn right round, not to Carmel but to Calvary, and go down at His bleeding feet and give yourself to Him. Leave the world, the flesh, and the Devil, and commit yourself to Him who died for you, and who has a right to every particle of your body and soul. Come along. Here is the stopping-place--THE CROSS. You have not got past it yet, thank God. You might have gone past it, but He is still crying, 'Come; and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.' Will you come and drink? Amen.

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