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Esther - Commentaries by Charles Henry Mackintosh

The Mackintosh Treasury: Vol. 3, Decision for Christ: Part 1

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In approaching the subject of " Decision for Christ," there are two or three obstacles which lie in our way—two or three difficulties which hang around the question, which we would fain remove, if possible, in order that the reader may be able to view the matter on its own proper ground, and in its own proper bearings.

In the first place, we encounter a serious difficulty in the fact that very few of us, comparatively, are in a condition of soul to appreciate the subject, or to suffer a word of exhortation thereon. We are, for the most part, so occupied with the question of our soul's salvation—so taken up with matters affecting ourselves, our peace, our liberty, our comfort, our deliverance from the wrath to come, our interest in Christ, that we have but little heart for aught that purely concerns Christ Himself—His Name—His Person—His cause—His glory.

There are, we may say, two things which lie at the foundation of all true decision for Christ, namely, a conscience purged by the blood of Jesus, and a heart that bows, with reverent submission, to the authority of His word, in all things. Now, we do not mean to dwell upon these things, in this paper; first, because we are anxious to get, at once, to our immediate theme; and, secondly, because by far the larger portion of the volumes of " Things New and Old" is devoted to the special object of establishing the conscience in the peace of the gospel, and in setting before the heart the paramount claims of the word of God. We merely refer to them here for the purpose of reminding the reader that they are absolutely essential materials in forming the basis of decision for Christ. If my conscience is ill at ease, if I am in doubt as to my salvation, if I am filled with " anxious thought" as to whether I am a child of God or not, decision for Christ is out of the question. I must know that Christ died for me, before I can, intelligently and happily, live for Him.

So also if there be any reserve in the heart as to my entire subjection to the authority of Christ as my Lord and Master, if I am keeping some chamber of my heart, be it ever so remote, ever so small, closed against the light of His word, it must, of necessity, hinder my wholehearted decision for Him in this world. In a word, I must know that Christ is mine and I am His, ere my course down here can be one of unswerving, uncompromising decision for Him. If the reader hesitates as to this, if he is still in doubt and darkness, let him pause, and turn directly to the cross of the Son of God, and hearken to what the Holy Spirit declares as to ail those who simply put their trust therein. Let him drink into his inmost soul these words, " Be it known unto you, therefore, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins; and by him, all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses." Yes, reader, these are the glad tidings for you. " All from all," by faith in a crucified and risen Lord.

But we see another difficulty in the way of our subject. We greatly fear, that while we speak of decision for Christ, some of our readers may suppose that we are contending for some notion or set of notions of our own, that we are pressing some peculiar views or principles to which we vainly and foolishly venture to apply the imposing title of "Decision for Christ." All this we do most solemnly disclaim. The words which stand at the head of this paper are the simple expression of our thesis. We do not contend for mere attachment to sect, party, or denomination, for adherence to the doctrines or commandments of men. We write in the immediate presence of Him who searcheth the hearts and trieth the reins of the children of men, and we distinctly avow that our one object is to urge upon the christian reader the necessity of decision for Christ. We would not, if we know ourselves, pen a single line to swell the ranks of a party, or draw over adherents to any particular doctrinal creed, or any special form of church polity. We are impressed with the conviction that where Christ has His right place in the heart, all will be right; and that, where He has not, there will be nothing right. And, further, we believe that nothing but plain decision for Christ can effectually preserve the soul from the fatal influences that are at work around us in the professing Church. Mere orthodoxy cannot preserve us. Attachment to religious forms will not avail in the present fearful struggle. It is, we feel persuaded, a simple question of Christ as our Life, and Christ as our Object. May the Spirit of God now enable us to ponder aright the subject of " Decision for Christ!"

It is well to bear in mind that there are certain great truths—certain immutable principles—which underlie all the dispensations of God, from age to age, and which remain untouched by all the failure, the folly, and the sin of man. It is on these great moral truths, these foundation principles, that faith lays hold, and in them finds its strength and its sustenance. Dispensations change and pass away—men prove unfaithful in their varied positions of stewardship and responsibility; but the word of the Lord endureth forever. It never changes, never fails. " Forever, Lord, thy word is settled in heaven.éé And, again, " Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name." Nothing can touch the eternal truth of God, and, therefore, what we want, at all times, is to give that truth its proper place in our hearts, to let it act on our conscience, form our character, and shape our way. " Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee." " Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every won. that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord." This is true security. Here lies the real secret of decision for Christ. What God has spoken must govern us in the most absolute manner, ere our path can be said to be one of plain decision. There may be tenacious adherence to our own notions, obstinate attachment to the prejudices of the age, a blind devotion to certain doctrines and practices resting on a traditionary foundation, certain opinions which we have received to hold without ever inquiring as to whether or not there be any authority whatever for such opinions in holy Scripture. There may be all this, and much more, and yet not one atom of genuine decision for Christ.

Now, we feel we cannot do better than furnish our readers with an example or two drawn from the page of inspired history, which will do more to illustrate and enforce our theme than aught that we could possibly advance. And first, then, let us turn to the book of Esther, and there contemplate, for a few moments, the instructive history of

"MORDECAI THE JEW."

This very remarkable man lived at a time in which the Jewish economy had failed through the unfaithfulness and disobedience of the Jewish people. The Gentile was in power. The relationship between Jehovah and Israel could no longer be publicly acknowledged. The faithful Jew had

but to hang his harp on the willows, and sigh over the faded light of other days. The chosen seed were in exile; the city and temple where their fathers worshipped were in ruins, and the vessels of the Lord's house were in a strange land. Such was the outward condition of things in the day in which Mordecai's lot was cast. But, in addition to this, there was a man, very near the throne, occupying only the second place in the empire, sitting beside the very fountain-head of authority, possessing princely wealth, and wielding almost boundless influence. To this great man, strange to say, the poor exiled Jew sternly refuses to bow. Nothing will induce him to yield a single mark of respect to the second man in the kingdom. He will save the life of Ahasuerus; but he will not bow to Haman.

Reader, why was this? Was this blind obstinacy or bold decision—which? In order to determine this we must inquire as to the real root or principle of Mordecai's acting. If, indeed, there was no authority for his conduct in the law of God, then must we, at once pronounce it to have been blind obstinacy, foolish pride, or, it may be, envy of a man in power. But if, on the other hand, there be within the covers of the five inspired books of Moses, a plain authority for Mordecai's deportment in this matter, then must we, without hesitation, pronounce his conduct to have been the rare and exquisite fruit of attachment to the law of his God, and uncompromising decision for Him and His holy authority.

This makes all the difference. If it be merely a matter of private opinion—a question concerning which each one may lawfully adopt his own view—then, verily, might such a line of conduct be justly termed the most narrow-minded bigotry. We hear a great deal, now-a-days, about narrow-mindedness on the one hand, and large-heartedness on the other. But, as a Roman orator, over two thousand years ago, exclaimed in the senate-house of Borne, " Conscript Fathers, long since, indeed, we have lost the true names of things;" so may we, in the bosom of the professing Church, at the close of the nineteenth century, repeat, with far greater force, " Long since we have lost the true names of things." For what do men now call bigotry and narrow-mindedness? A faithful clinging to, and carrying out of, "Thus saith the Lord." And what do they designate large-heartedness? A readiness to sacrifice truth on the altar of politeness and civility.

Reader, be thou fully assured that thus it is at this solemn moment. We do not want to be sour or cynical, morose, or gloomy. But we must speak the truth, if we are to speak at all. We desire that the tongue may be hushed in silence, and the pen may drop from the hand, if we could basely cushion the plain, bold, unvarnished truth, through fear of scattering our readers, or to avoid the sneer of the infidel. We cannot shut our eyes to the solemn fact that God's truth is being trampled in the dust; that the Name of Jesus is despised and rejected. We have only to pass from city to city, and from town to town, of highly-favored England, and read upon the walls the melancholy proofs of the truth of our assertions. Truth is flung aside, in cold contempt. The Name of Jesus is little set by. On the other hand, man is exalted, His reason deified, his will indulged. Where must all this end? " In the blackness of darkness forever."

How refreshing, in the face of all this, to ponder the history of Mordecai the Jew! It is very plain that he knew little and cared less about the thoughts of men on the question of narrow-mindedness. He obeyed the word of the Lord, and this we must be allowed to call real breadth of mind—true largeness of heart. For what, after all, is a narrow mind? A narrow mind we hold to be a mind which refuses to open itself to admit the truth of God. And what, on the contrary, is a large and liberal heart? A heart expanded by the truth and grace of God. Let us not be scared away from the path of plain decision, by the scornful epithets which men have bestowed upon that path. It is a path of peace and purity, a path where the light of an approving conscience is enjoyed, and upon which the beams of divine favor ever pour themselves in undimmed luster.

But why did Mordecai refuse to bow to Haman? Was there any great principle at stake? Was it merely a whim of his own? Had he a " Thus saith the Lord" for his warrant in refusing a single nod of the head to the proud Amalekite? Yes. Let us turn to the seventeenth chapter of the book of Exodus, and there we read, " And the Lord said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. And Moses built an altar and called the name of it JEHOVAH-nissi; for he said, Because the Lord hath sworn that the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."1

Here, then, was Mordecai's authority for not bowing to Haman the Agagite. A faithful Jew could not do reverence to one with whom Jehovah was at war. The heart might plead a thousand excuses and urge a thousand reasons. It might seek an easy path for itself on the plea that the Jewish system was in ruins, and the Amalekite in power, and that therefore it was worse than useless, yea, it was positively absurd to maintain such lofty ground when the glory of Israel was gone, and the Amalekite was in the place of authority. " Of what use," it might be argued, " can it be to hold up the standard when all is gone to pieces? You are only making your degradation more remarkable by the pertinacious refusal to bow your head. Would it not be better to give just one nod? That will settle the matter. Haman will be satisfied, and you and your people will be safe. Do not be obstinate. Show a tendency to be courteous. Do not stand up, in that dogged way, for a thing so manifestly non-essential. Besides, you should remember that the command in Exod. 17 was only to be rehearsed in the ears of Joshua, and only had its true application in his bright and palmy days. It was never meant for the ears of an exile, never intended to apply in the days of Israel's desolation."

All this, and much beside, might have been urged on Mordecai; but, ah! the answer was simple. " God hath spoken. This is enough for me. True, we are a scattered people; but the word of the Lord is not scattered. He has not reversed His word about Amalek, nor entered into a treaty of peace with him. Jehovah and Amalek are still at war, and Amalek stands before me in the person of this haughty Agagite. How can I bow to one with whom Jehovah is at war? How can I do homage to a man whom the faithful Samuel would hew in pieces before the Lord?" "Well, then," it might be further urged upon this devoted Jew, " you will all be destroyed. You must either bow or perish." The answer is still most simple. " I have nothing to do with consequences. They are in the hand of God. Obedience is my path, the results are with Him. It is better to die with a good conscience than live with a bad one. It is better to go to heaven with an uncondemning heart, than remain upon earth with a heart that would make me a coward. God has spoken. I can do no otherwise. May the Lord help me! Amen."

Oh! how well we can understand the mode in which this faithful Jew would be assaulted by the enemy. Nothing but the grace of God can ever enable any one to maintain a deportment of unflinching decision, at a moment in which everything within and around is against us. True it is, we know that it is better to suffer anything than deny our Lord, or fly in the face of His commandments; but yet how little are some of us prepared to endure a single sneer, a single scornful look, a single contemptuous expression, for Christ's sake. And, perhaps, there are few things harder, for some of us at least, to bear than to be reproached on the ground of narrow-mindedness and bigotry. We naturally like to be thought large-hearted and liberal. We like to be accounted men of enlightened mind, sound judgment, and comprehensive grasp. But we must remember that we have no right to be liberal at our Master's expense. We have simply to obey.

Thus it was with Mordecai. He stood like a rook and allowed the whole tide of difficulty and opposition to roll over him. He would not bow to the Amalekite, let the consequence be what it might. Obedience was his path. The results were with God. And look at the result! In one moment, the tide was turned. The proud Amalekite fell from his lofty eminence, and the exiled Jew was lifted from his sackcloth and ashes and placed next the throne. Haman exchanged his wealth and dignities for a gallows; Mordecai exchanged his sackcloth for a royal robe.

Now, it may not always happen that the reward of simple obedience will be as speedy and as signal as in Mordecai's case. And, moreover, we may say that we are not Mordecais, nor are we placed in his position. But the principle holds good whoever and wherever we are. There is not one of us, however obscure or insignificant, that has not a sphere within which our influence is felt for good or for evil. And, besides, independent altogether of our circumstances and the apparent results of our conduct, we are called upon to obey implicitly the word of the Lord—to have His word hidden in our hearts—to refuse, with unswerving decision, to do or to say aught that the word of the living God condemns. " How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" This should be the language, whether it be the question of a child tempted to steal a lump of sugar, or the most momentous step in evil that one can be tempted to take. The strength and moral security of Mordecai's position lay in this fact, that he had the word of God for his authority. Had it not been so, his conduct would have been senseless in the extreme. To have refused the usual expression of respect to one in high authority, without some weighty reason, could only be regarded as the most unmeaning obstinacy. But the moment you introduce a " Thus saith the Lord," the matter is entirely changed. The word of the Lord endureth forever. The divine testimonies do not fade away or change with the times and seasons. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but one jot or one tittle of what our God hath spoken shall never pass away. Hence, what had been rehearsed in the ears of Joshua, as he rested in triumph under the banner of Jehovah, was designed to govern the conduct of Mordecai, though clothed in sackcloth as an exile, in the city of Shushan. Ages and generations had passed away; the days of the Judges and the days of the Kings had run their course; but the commandment of the Lord with respect to Amalek had lost—could lose—none of its force. "The Lord hath sworn that the Lord will have war with Amalek," not merely in the days of Joshua, nor in the days of the Judges, nor in the days of the Kings, but " from generation to generation." Such was the record—the imperishable and immutable record of God, and such was the plain, solid, and unquestionable foundation of Mordecai's conduct.

And here let us say a few words as to the immense importance of entire submission to the word of God. We live in a day which is plainly marked by strong self-will. Man's reason, man's will, and man's interest are working together, with appalling success, to ignore the authority of holy Scripture. So long as the statements of the word of God chime in with man's reason, so long as they do not run counter to his will, and are not subversive of his interests, so long he will tolerate them, or it may be he will quote them with a measure of respect, or, at least, with self-complacency; but the moment it becomes a question of Scripture versus reason, will, or interest, the former is either silently ignored or contemptuously rejected. This is a very marked and solemn feature of the days that are now passing over our heads. It behooves Christians to be aware of it, and to be on their watchtower. We fear that very few comparatively are truly alive to the real state of the moral atmosphere which enwraps the religious world. We do not refer here so much to the bold attacks of infidel writers. To these we have alluded elsewhere. What we have now before us is rather the cool indifference, on the part of professing Christians, as to Scripture; the little power which pure truth wields over the conscience; the way in which the edge of Scripture is blunted or turned aside. You quote passage after passage from the inspired Volume, hut it seems like the pattering of rain upon the; window; the reason is at work, the will is dominant, interest is at stake, human opinions bear sway, God's truth is practically, if not in so many words, set aside.

All this is deeply solemn. We know of few things more dangerous than intellectual familiarity with the letter of Scripture where the spirit of it docs not govern the conscience, form the character, and shape the way. We want to tremble at the word of God, to bow down, in reverential submission, to its holy authority, in all things. A single line of Scripture ought to be sufficient for our souls, on any point, even though, in carrying it out, we should have to move athwart the opinions of the highest and best of men. May the Lord raise up many faithful and true-hearted witnesses in these last days—men like the faithful Mordecai who would rather ascend a gallows than bow to an Amalekite!

(To be continued, if the Lord will)

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