VI.

WHY LIFTED UP?

"How sayest thou, The Son of Man must be lifted up?"
—John xii: 34.

THREE times, in the Gospel of John, we find our Lord speaking of his lifting up. By the expression "lifted up" is meant, beyond all question, his crucifixion on the cross; for so the evangelist interprets the words. "I, if I be lifted up from the earth," says Jesus; and John adds, "This he said signifying what death he should die."

Now, such an event as this was so contrary to all the Jewish ideas that the people who heard Christ's prediction wondered, and asked with incredulity, "We have heard out of the law that Christ abideth forever; and how sayest thou, The Son of Man must be lifted up?" What is the meaning of this lifting up? What is the necessity of it? It is a question whose echo has not ceased even unto the present day. And, instead of attempting to answer it ourselves, by reason or conjecture, we ask you to listen to three answers which the Lord himself has given in several passages of the Gospel of John.

I. The Son of Man must be lifted up in order to give a demonstration of his divine manhood. "When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself" (John viii: 28).

Then shall ye know that I am what I have professed to be,—the Son of God, sent from heaven to do the work and speak the words of the Father, and at the same time the Son of Man, wearing a human nature and subject to human suffering. This was what Christ repeatedly declared concerning himself,—that he was the divine man, Son of God and Son of man in one. And he seems to predict that his crucifixion shall give a startling and conclusive vindication of the claim.

Now, it seems to me that if I wished to prove beyond question that Jesus Christ was a man, I should go to the cross and see him die. For man only dies. God cannot die; the angels cannot die. Not one of all the heavenly beings can ever feel the icy touch of death laid upon him. But man dies everywhere. Death is the one universal sign and mark of humanity. Differing in a thousand things,—in race, in feature, in complexion,—all men are alike in this, that they die. "It is appointed unto men once to die." And the death
seal set upon the brow is, alas! the “one touch of nature” that “makes the whole world kin.”

Therefore, when I see Jesus bowing his head, and dying on the cross; and when I see them taking his body, all limp and pallid, and laying it in the tomb,—I say, “Surely this was the Son of man; for only a man can thus die and be buried.” And when, from the exaltation of the cross, I hear him, in the exaltation of the throne, saying, “I am he that liveth and was dead,” I exclaim yet once more, “Surely this is the Son of Man; for neither God, nor angels, nor cherubim, can say, ‘I was dead.’” That language belongs solely to the vocabulary of man. So I repeat that the death on the cross establishes beyond question the manhood of Jesus Christ.

But, if Jesus proved himself human by dying as every man dies, he also proved himself divine by dying as no other man ever died. There are circumstances about his death that mark it as unlike any other that ever occurred on earth. Stand with me by the cross, and note these circumstances.

As he hangs there, in agony and suffering, the sun shuts his eye in horror upon the scene, and “from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour.” The veil of the temple, woven with strong and costly fibre, is rent, as though seized by some mighty and invisible hand, and torn from top to bottom. There is an earthquake, and a rending of the rocks. Dead men, in their graves, wake up, and come forth from their unlocked prison-house. These things were so startling and portentous that when the centurion, and they that were with him watching Jesus, saw them, they exclaimed, “Truly this was the Son of God.” Just as Jesus had predicted,—“When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am he.”

But these are not the most striking witnesses to Christ’s divinity in his death. How do men generally die? The strength grows feebler and feebler; the pulse beats fainter and fainter; the tones of the voice die away to a whisper, till, as the end draws near, the power of speech is lost, and, amid a silence broken only by gasping breath and stifled moan, the spirit is torn away from the body. But how did Jesus die? He “cried with a loud voice, and yielded up his spirit.” What does that loud voice signify but a man strong and mighty even in death? He who as death’s master had stood at the grave in Bethany, and “cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come forth,’” proved himself death’s master still by crying with a loud voice as he yields up his spirit. It is the voice of command, and not of
entreaty. It is the "Captain of our Salvation," who had once ordered the grave to open her doors to deliver up a prisoner, and was instantly obeyed, now, with the same sovereign authority, ordering death to open her doors, and receive such a prisoner as she had never held before,—that, by dying and rising again, he may become "Lord both of the dead and living."

And not only this,—"Jesus, when he had cried, again with a loud voice, yielded up his spirit." And what mean these words? When was ever such a thing said before? When a man dies his spirit is torn from him. He struggles with gasping breath and fluttering heart to retain it, but he cannot. "There is no man," says Solomon, "that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death." But here is One who has "power over his spirit." He yields it up. Instead of passive submission, here is action in death. Instead of helpless overthrow, here is sovereign surrender. The spirit which is rent from mortal man Jesus calmly hands over to the Father. And here is One that has "power, in the day of death." Did he not say, "I have power to lay down my life"? and in every act, and word, and circumstance of the crucifixion we find the proof of it. How significantly saith the Holy Ghost: "He became

obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." Obedience implies freedom of will, not helpless necessity. None of us are obedient to death. We submit to go under his ghastly yoke because we can do no otherwise. But we loathe "The terrible Captain, Sepulchre, and his standard-bearer, Corruption," and most gladly, if we could, would we break from their tyranny. But Christ became obedient unto death. What we accept as a necessity, he obeyed as a duty. What we submit to because we must, he accepted because he willed to do it. Talk we of the two great parts of Christ's mission, as "his doing and his dying"? Yes! and his whole life of doing was a dying, as he lived in contact with our mortal nature; and his dying on the cross was the mightiest act of doing in all his earthly mission. For then, not in passive endurance, but in priestly agency and royal power, he laid down his life for the world. And thus Christ's prediction concerning his death was most literally fulfilled by the attending circumstances; and on the cross, at least, he stands proved to be the divine man. For God cannot die like men; but here is a man who dies like a God; death cannot lay his hand on the Almighty; but here is One, whose name is called the "Mighty God," taking his own life, and, with strong and omnipotent grasp, handing it over to death. Truly
this Son of God is human, or he could not die. Truly this Son of Man is divine, or he could not die in such a manner. We believe thy words, O thou Christ of God! "When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am he."

II. The Son of Man must be lifted up in order to bring to bear the most powerful divine attraction upon men. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John xii: 32).

You know very well what the strongest bonds of attraction are between man and man,—namely, love and sympathy. And these two are braided together into a twofold cord in Christ crucified. Sympathy drew him down from heaven to seek the lost, and love lifted him up from the earth to save the lost. And, since Christ's death is the summary of all his acts, the culmination of his doing as well as of his dying, we find all the other attractions of his love combined and concentrated in this. When St. Paul appeared so entranced and overmastered by the claims of the gospel that some accused him of being beside himself, this, you remember, was the only explanation he offered of his spiritual intensity: "For the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then all died." —"If one died for all." — Oh, this is the fact in the history of Jesus Christ that touches the heart and
draws it to God! The life of Christ inspires us; the example of Christ elevates us; the teachings of Christ convict us; but, beyond all things else, it is the death of Christ that draws us. And yet here is a point where evangelical religion finds a sharp issue springing up between itself and other forms of belief. "Divine love we insist on as strongly as you do," says the objector, "as the only true motive power for drawing souls to God; but in defining that love we take a wider sweep than you do. We find its presence and its inspiration in every flower, in every star, in every mountain and hill and valley, in the purple clouds, and in the deep-voiced sea,—these are its articulate voices. And if you recall us from nature to the Bible, even there we take a broader range than you do. In the life and example of Christ, in his works of mercy and beneficence, and in the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth, we find the highest exhibition of divine love. Isn't it somewhat narrow in Paul to shut himself up so closely to the cross for the source of his inspiration and enthusiasm? Isn't it somewhat narrow in you to insist on the death of Christ on Calvary as the great motive to love?" Narrow, I admit. But I remember, also, that sometimes narrow things are the most powerful. I recall a stream with which I am familiar, which, at one point,
broadens out for miles into a wide and beautiful expanse of waters. Nothing could be more lovely than the tranquil flow and calm, majestic sweep of the waters at this place. But a little further down, the stream gathers itself up and plunges through a narrow gorge between the hills. There is far less of beauty here. But here is the place of power. Here is where the huge wheels of industry are placed. Here is where the factories, with their ponderous machinery, have been reared. So we admit that nothing could be more majestic than the life of Jesus Christ; nothing could be more beautiful and inspiring than his lofty teachings; nothing could be more quickening to our love than the study of his works of mercy. But, after all, it is the cross where the love of Christ culminates and manifests its greatest power. There the current of divine love gathers itself up, and pours its mighty tide through one act,—the greatest and most powerful which the universe has witnessed. There is where great souls, like Paul, have placed themselves to get the fullest sway and sweep of the love of God.

But I speak not simply or chiefly of the power of the uplifted Christ to draw men to service, and inspire them with ardor, but also to win them from sin. There is nothing,—there can be nothing—which will draw a man away from his sins like the

revelation that One has died to save him from those sins. And I think we can see at once why this must be so. It is undeserved love that forms the central attraction of the cross. It is love towards enemies,—the rarest thing in the universe to find. It is love that claims no requital or reward. But that is not all,—it is a love whose highest attribute is just the opposite to that of sin. The essence of sin is selfishness; the essence of atoning love is unselfishness. And so, while in a thousand voices God declares his love to us, the one great commendation of that love is found in the death of Christ. "God commendeth his love to us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And such love must surely beget love.

The law commanded love—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart." But the law was powerless to exact what it commanded. Its cold tables of stone had no tears to weep over the guilty and unloving. Its stern voice had no pathetic undertone of "Father, forgive them" for those who had broken the commandment and given hatred for affection. "But what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh," God sent his own Son to do. He, stepping between us and the law, meets that law, on the one hand, and pays its utmost penalty, and then turns
to us, and says, "If you cannot love God, because it is commanded in the tables of stone, you surely cannot help loving, when God's love is commended to you in the fleshy tables of my bleeding heart." Oh, the depth of the riches of Christ's love! How marvellous the contrast between law and grace! The law exacting to the last particle, not a jot or a tittle remitted; failure in one single point counted failure in all. But grace not only forgiving freely, but abundantly. "The grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant." "Where sin abounded grace did much more abound." Truly may we say, in those grand words of a great preacher, which I love to quote, "In the cross I see excess conquered by excess,—excess of sin conquered by excess of love."

And how can we resist such love? Is there a heart amongst us that can be indifferent to this divine attraction? I am sure there is not. You will be drawn. But will you be drawn out of your sins? That is the question. Clinging to your idols, loving still your sins, choosing your own will, you may, nevertheless, feel so strongly the power of Christ's sacrifice that you will find your heart powerfully attracted to him. But he was lifted up, that he might draw all men unto him by drawing them out of, and away from, the sins that had put them so far off from him.

The sun, lifted into the meridian heavens, draws through its far-reaching beams from ten thousand lakes and rivers and oceans. But there is separation as well as attraction. Here a crystal drop is lifted from a muddy pool, but with no trace of impurity remaining in it; and there another drop is drawn from the dead sea waters, but with no taint of the acrid salts left in it. There is attraction and separation in one process. So, as the beams of love from Christ's cross fall upon this sinful world, they draw men to Him who died. Oh, be sure, my friends, if you to-day have felt this divine attraction, as Christ has been set forth, evidently crucified in the midst of you, be sure that you yield to it; but be doubly sure to pray that, in being drawn to Christ, you may be drawn from your sins; that, with a ray of love from the cross attracting you, there may be also a drop of blood from the cross to cleanse you. For not alone to win you to himself did Jesus die; but also to win you away forever from the guilt that has held you in the bondage of corruption. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins."

III. The Son of Man must be lifted up in order to accomplish a divine redemption for men. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever
believeth on him might not perish, but have eternal life” (John iii: 14).

Here we find man's salvation absolutely fastened to Christ's crucifixion. “Without the shedding of blood there is no remission;” and so Jesus must be lifted up for the shedding of his blood. Every drop of blood sprinkled in worship, from the beginning of the world, pointed forward to his, which alone had power to take away sins. If he be not lifted up, all God’s types and sacrifices, throughout the ages, have deceived. Instead of being shadows of the true, they are only ritual falsehoods, telling of a sacrifice that shall never be offered. If he be not lifted up, God’s oath has been broken. He made a covenant to save those who should afterward believe. That covenant must be sealed with blood; and only in the veins of Christ’s sinless body was “the blood of the everlasting covenant” which could prove God true. The salvation of myriads upon myriads of human souls hangs on the question whether or not Christ shall be lifted up. What a question is this which we are considering! In the garden Christ prayed, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” It was not possible. Had he not “tasted death for every man,” every man would have had to drink of “the cup of the fierceness of God’s wrath.” On the cross they said, “He saved others; himself he cannot save.” No; he could not save himself if he would save others. His death was the solemn and absolute condition of their life. You see, then, what a word this is,—“Must be lifted up.” It is a word that has necessity woven into every fibre of its meaning. “The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinners, and be crucified, and rise again the third day,” he had said a little while ago—must, because he hears the wail of a perishing world piercing his tender heart, and calling for its help; must, because he sees the vision of a redeemed humanity kindling a holy joy above the blackness of his approaching sorrow; must, because for this cause he came into this hour, that he might give his life a ransom for many.

“Voluntary!” do we say of Christ’s sufferings? Yes: but with a holy being voluntariness is often the sternest necessity. The needle that swings so freely on its pivot, because it feels the attraction of the pole, cannot help turning always to the north. And because Christ’s free will—not de- ranged and perverted like ours—was always open to the Father’s will, it could not help yielding to the drawing of that will. And, since God had purposed from the beginning to save men by the cross, Christ’s holy will turned in unconstrained necessity to that cross, and said, “Even so must
the Son of Man be lifted up." Free, indeed, was he, and the master of his own life. But his was the freedom of duty, and not of self-pleasing. His will, moving free and unconstrained, was yet poised and possessed by the will of his Father. See how, in his own declaration, he thus binds freedom to holy necessity: "I have power to lay down my life, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father." Freedom, was this, and yet the freedom of filial obedience to his Father's command, which was holy necessity. "If he be the Son of God, let him come down from the cross," his enemies cried. And because he was the Son of God—the Son that "learned obedience by the things that he suffered"—he could not come down. If it had been only the iron nails that bound his hands and his feet to the cross, he could have torn them away easily enough. For what were spikes of steel in those hands that a little while ago had broken the bars of death for Lazarus and the widow's son! What were fetters of iron upon those feet that a little while ago had walked the stormy sea of Galilee as though it were a marble pavement! Spikes and cords! No strength of man could forge them strong enough to bind the Son of God to the cross, and hold him there. And yet it is true that he must be lifted up; and that, being lifted up, he could not come down. The strength of love, the oath of the covenant,—this was the "nail fastened in a sure place," when the nail of the Roman soldier could have been torn from its socket by one forth-putting of his will. Oh, blessed necessity of holy love and holy loyalty! Where had we been to-day if it had not held him?

And now, friends, how clear it is that, if Christ must be lifted up, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, you must believe on him, or you will perish. Our necessity and our freedom are bound up in the same bond with those of Christ.

As he was free to lay down his life for us, or not, we are free to take eternal life from his hand, or not. As he must lay down his life that we might not perish, we must believe on him or we shall perish forever. O man, believe now! Behold, I have set before you this day life and death! As a free agent, choose ye; or, by an awful and resistless necessity, you must be lost.