

XI.

The Cross Revealing to Us the Love of God.

DECEMBER, 23, 1855.

“O Lord God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee. Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry; for my soul is full of troubles, and my life draweth nigh unto the grave. I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength. Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more: and they are cut off from thy hand. Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps. Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves. Selah. Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me; thou hast made me an abomination unto them: I am shut up, and I cannot come forth. Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: Lord, I have called daily upon thee; I have stretched out my hands unto thee. Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Selah. Shall thy loving-kindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction? shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But unto thee have I lied, O Lord; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee. Lord, why cuttest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me? I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up: while I suffer thy terrors I am distracted. Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off. They came round about me daily like water; they compassed me about together. Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.—PSALM lxxxviii.

MY good friends, who give me such a touching proof of your affection and fraternal sympathy, in coming to partake with me of the Lord's Supper—which from week to week nourishes and strengthens both my body and soul—there is in the psalm which was read at the beginning of this service, the eighty-eighth, a feature which renders it quite unique: it is the only one which is written entirely under a feeling of depression, and which terminates without one word of consolation. It is sad and sorrowful from beginning to end, and we must look attentively to find a gleam of hope in the name given to God in one of the first verses: “God of my salvation.” And why this strange mystery? I find two explanations. The first is, that God will show us by the Psalms, that though it is in accordance with the habitual exercise of His mercy that we never cry to Him without being relieved, and we often find only the short space of a few verses separating the deepest anguish and the most abundant consolation—as, for instance, in the thirteenth Psalm; yet it may sometimes enter into the Lord's designs to let us cry to Him during a certain time without receiving any answer, without consolation, without the least ray coming to cheer our distress. It is then that we must feed by faith alone; and with Jeremiah, with David, and with all the saints tried in the same way, wait for Him, ask why He hides himself, and, in spite of the cloud that veils Him, never distrust, never doubt Him. There is, among a hundred and fifty psalms, one psalm which teaches us this lesson, as if it were hard for the Lord's love to give us such a warning. But there is a second explanation of this psalm, which is, however, derived from the first. You know that the Psalms are full of the Messiah; it is Christ who speaks, who expresses His sorrow; and we find in the eighty-

eighth the same Saviour as in that expression of the twenty-second Psalm, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" which is followed immediately by, "But thou art holy, . . . delivering them that trust in thee." This psalm shows us that the Saviour's distress was so excessive that it surpasses all that men, and even the most afflicted of His servants, can—I do not say feel—but even conceive. And why was this? Be-cause God is love. The answer is strange, but true. God is love: but for us, my dear friends, however surrounded we may be by the gifts of God, whether temporal or spiritual, or of whatever kind—though we have His Word, His promises, and all the rest—something is still wanting, if we may so speak, to enable the love of God to find its way to our heart—and that is suffering. We know that God does not suffer; that He is incapable of it; that He is raised above suffering, as above temptation and all the sorrows of the earth; and to make us understand the love of God in all its fulness and its reality, it was necessary that God should manifest himself to our view so as to prove His love by His sufferings, since man could never have been persuaded, or rather never could have been won, otherwise.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, himself God, became the son of man in order to be capable of suffering, and thus show us the love of God under a form capable of subduing the hardest hearts, even though they take little heed. Jesus came upon the earth to suffer, and how well He accomplished the task! He began by taking a body similar to our sinful body; and who amongst us can conceive all the self-denial, the humiliation, the sacrifice, that the Lord of glory, the Prince of life, underwent, in lowering himself to the misery of our poor nature, and taking upon Him all its degradation, even to that of the tomb? "Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant.... He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." And here observe that what distinguishes the sorrows and sufferings of Jesus Christ from ours is, that He chose them voluntarily. Nothing obliged Him to do it; He chose them, and submitted to them one after another, to accomplish His Father's will, but to accomplish it freely. And why? For us; because He could not bear the thought of the eternal misery into which sin had betrayed us. What love, O God, what love! I pass rapidly over His life of sorrows and humiliations to arrive at Gethsemane. In the middle of the night you see in the Garden of Olives a man prostrate upon the earth, with his face to the ground, weeping, crying. You think, perhaps, that he has lost his reason. It is your Saviour! Observe His posture, His prayer, the tender reproaches He addresses to His disciples, and measure by them the immensity of His sufferings—sufferings that we are no more able to appreciate, or even to imagine, than we are to appreciate and to imagine what God and the infinite are; because it was not only physical and outward suffering, but a spiritual suffering, of which we can have no idea. Not only saints, but even men who knew not the Lord, have suffered patiently the most intense pain; but Jesus, with His infinite bodily sufferings, had one secret and hidden suffering, which we cannot penetrate—that of bearing alone, in presence of a holy God, the just for the unjust, the weight of our

sins, and being by them, as it were, separated for a moment (I dare scarcely glance at this mystery)—separated for a moment from the love of the Father (if one may so speak, though He is one with Him), and of being constrained to cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Why does He suffer thus? For thee, sinner, for thee, He so loved thee, that, hadst thou alone upon earth needed salvation, He would have entered for thee into His Gethsemane. What love, my God, what love! And at last, see Him upon the cross! I will not enlarge upon the subject; even though I had the strength to do it, how could I enter upon such a mystery? I place myself with you at the foot of the cross, and contemplate the sufferings of my Saviour. And here remark, it is at the very moment He is given up to such dreadful anguish, to that agony that no man can appreciate nor conceive, nor scarcely obtain a faint idea of, that He overcomes all pain to glorify God, and to save men to the uttermost; and it is from the depths of this agony that we hear words like these, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And again, “Woman, behold thy son; disciple, behold thy mother.” What love, my God, what love!

Last Sunday we contemplated from the foot of the cross the view it presents of the horror, of the immensity, and of the terrors of sin. It is sweet to contemplate today, in the sufferings of our Saviour, the view they exhibit of the great, the incomprehensible depths of the mercy of God. Oh, my friends, let us always have this love present to our mind; it will explain everything, even the most cruel sufferings, since they are only the consequence of what He suffered for us. At the same time, it will make everything smooth and easy. Faith renders everything possible; love makes everything easy: “His commandments are not grievous.” Full of this image of the Saviour’s love, and of the love of God revealed in the Saviour, reading in His paternal heart the love of God for us, we shall give ourselves up entirely to the Lord, to do and to suffer all He shall see fit to send us. Pray that we may be deeply impressed with this sentiment, “God is love;” and to this end let us abide patiently at the foot of the Saviour’s cross, and never lose sight of it, till after we have suffered a little, seeing that it is needful, He will take us by the hand, and leading us over the interval that separates Friday from Sunday morning, will raise us with Himself, and establish us with Himself, in the abode of glory where He is waiting for us and where we shall praise Him the more that we shall have suffered more, and especially if we have suffered for His name, Amen.