

THE AMERICAN NATIONAL PREACHER.

No. 3, Vol. XXXI.]

MARCH, 1857.

[Whole No. 363.]

SERMON DCCIII.

BY REV. JAMES M. MACDONALD, D.D.

PRINCETON, N. J.

THE POWER OF CHRIST OVER HIS LIFE.

"No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.—JOHN x. 18.

OUR Lord here speaks of His human life. This no man had power to take from Him; but He had power of Himself to lay it down, and take it again.

The text was one of those sayings which led many of the Jews, who listened to the discourse to which it belongs, to affirm that He who uttered it was mad. Their ideas of the Messiah were altogether earthly. When therefore the true Messiah spake of laying down his life, and taking it again, they were ready to ask, "He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him?"

But the text throws convincing light upon one of the most important doctrines of Revelation,—the Divinity of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. A doctrine may often be established, perhaps more convincingly, by passages which were not uttered or written expressly to assert it, but which necessarily imply it, or are even so founded upon the doctrine that they have no intelligible import if that be denied. The doctrine of the Messiah's Divinity is interwoven with the teachings of the Bible. In the text it was not the Saviour's object to assert His Divinity; but, having declared that His Father loves Him, because He lays down His life for His people, He takes occasion to make express mention of His absolute power over His human life. Now the death of Christ has sometimes been alleged as an argument against His Divinity. Indeed the difficulty of reconciling his dying with his being God probably very often occurs to some

minds. But viewed aright, viewed in the light which the text throws upon the subject, instead of being an objection, His death becomes an unanswerable argument in proof of His being Divine.

I. First, we are to consider Christ's power over His life, in laying it down, as a proof of His being God. "No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." Now, does such a power as Jesus Christ here claims belong to mere human nature, as one of its essential properties? The question needs only to be asked; for we never feel our impotence more than in respect to preserving and prolonging our own lives, when disease commences its ravages, or the weapon of death, in the hand of an assassin or a madman, is pointed at our heart. If then we deny the Divinity of the Redeemer, does it not shut us up to the profane conclusion, that He was distinguished from other men, only by assuming a more boastful tone, and claiming higher prerogatives, by less frequently and explicitly acknowledging His dependence on God? Put such language into the mouth of a mere man or dependent creature, as we find the Saviour using on almost every page of the Gospel, and it would be profane boasting; nay, it would be nothing less than blasphemy,—the very interpretation which the unbelieving Jews put upon His language, when He said, "I and my Father are one:" they even took up stones to cast at Him, because they said He had been guilty of blasphemy, in claiming to be equal with God.

But it is important to look carefully at the meaning of the terms which the Saviour employs. "No man taketh it (my life) from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again."

What is the life of which He speaks. It is unquestionably the natural or animal life, that state of being in which the soul and body are united. In regard to the word which Christ employed, which we express by the word *power*, it is undeniable that its primary sense is moral power. But He claims here something more than authority or moral right to part with His life, at the hands of his persecutors; he claims ability, inherent strength, or efficiency to lay it down of himself. The word He employs is used in precisely the same sense as in Luke xii. 5, where it is said "Fear Him which after He hath killed hath *power* to cast into hell;" or as in Rev. ix. 3, "And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth; and unto them was given *power* as the scorpions of the earth have *power*." There is no usage, which would permit us to speak of ourselves or of any mere man, as possessed of such power as this over life. But further, our Lord distinctly claims this as an inherent, undervived ability or efficiency: "I lay it down *of myself*," i. e., of His own will, without authority or command from another; and it further means that

He might have done it without the agency or help of others. His power was most absolute and underived. In speaking of His resurrection, He uses the same term, "I have *power* to take it again," in which it is manifest that it can not mean authority but must mean ability, or efficiency. Power of *himself* can not possibly mean a derived authority, or a merely underived right; nor can it mean a delegated efficiency; but if language means any thing, and can ever be explicit, it means the most absolute ability, and control, both an innate right and an inherent efficiency or strength.

The expression, "I have power," in the text, is then clearly one which no mere man ever did, or ever could use, without the greatest presumption. It expresses the most absolute control over the union between the soul and body, as adequate to dissolve it, and re-establish it, at pleasure. Without the intervention of any second cause, without the effect of any disease, without any act of violence done to him, our Lord claimed to possess the power of parting with his life at will, and to possess this power in a more absolute sense than a man has power to lay aside a garment from his body;—for as a man is dependent on God for life and breath and all things, he cannot so much as lay aside a garment of himself. He avers that it is beyond the power of men to deprive Him of life. They could invent no means,—they could employ no weapons, by which to take away His life. The infuriated Jews might have showered missiles upon Him like hail, or beset Him with ten thousand swords, and they would have discovered no vulnerable point; they never could have succeeded in dissolving the mysterious union of the soul and body, unless He had consented to lay down His life. Even after being suspended on the cross, if He had not consented to exercise this power, instead of hanging there six hours, he might have remained a living, breathing sacrifice on the cross, six thousand years, in spite of the spears of Roman soldiers, and their barbarous practice of breaking the bones of the crucified. No man, without His permission, could take His life from Him. When therefore He laid down His life, it was His own voluntary act. It was an act of Divine power. When our Lord spake in the text, "I have power," He spake as a Divine Being. His death, therefore, when rightly viewed, instead of being a ground on which to call in question His Deity, confirms our faith in it.

If it be objected that Christ could not have possessed a real human body unless it was subject to death, by the ordinary means which produce dissolution in others, all that needs to be said in reply is, that it was rendered invulnerable only by the exercise of that Divine power which the text so clearly ascribes to Him. His body, just like ours, was subject to pain, and weakness, and death; but He possessed a power, if He had chosen to exercise it, sufficient for its complete protection against all the ills which

flesh is heir to. It is obvious enough that every human body would be invulnerable, if such a power were put in exercise for its defence.

The correctness of the foregoing exposition of the text may be argued from what we are elsewhere taught respecting Christ's power over life, and over His own life in particular. I therefore proceed to observe that Christ's power over His life is evident from what the Scriptures teach in regard to His being the Author or Fountain of life. He is expressly styled the "Prince of Life," Acts iii. 16, an expression which denotes most emphatically His dominion over life, the meaning being that he is the Giver or Author of life; life being used in an enlarged sense, to denote natural, as well as spiritual life. In like manner, it is said, "In Him was life," John i. 4. The Evangelist first ascribes to Him creative power: "All things were made by Him and without Him was not any thing made that was made." Every thing was created by Him—the solid world, man, and all living things, great and small; "by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions, or principalities or powers, all things were created by Him, and for Him." The Evangelist, having affirmed that all things were created by Christ, immediately adds, "In Him was life." It was He who imparted the living principle to the products of the vegetable kingdom, to the animal tribes, and breathed into man a living soul. He is the Author and Giver of the mysterious principle of life. The Father (says this same Evangelist) hath life in Himself, and the son equally hath life in Himself. The same attribute which is ascribed to the Father is ascribed to the Son. The Scriptures do not only ascribe to Him the creation of matter, but the still higher attribute of power to originate and impart life. What else, then, are we to understand from the expression in regard to His power to lay down and take up life of Himself, than that He who was the Author of life in man, in angels, principalities and powers, thrones and dominions, was the Author of His own human life, and maintained the most absolute control over it.

Again: Christ's perfect power over His life may be argued from its being His own voluntary act, in assuming it. He took our nature; it was not forced upon Him; it was not, in any sense, bestowed upon Him, but it was assumed, by His own free act. "He made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Himself the form of a servant." He laid aside the glory which He had with the Father, before the foundation of the world. It was not wrested or taken from Him, but He laid it aside Himself. He took upon Himself the form of a servant; i. e., He gave life to a human soul and body, and veiled His divinity in this earthly tabernacle. It was a divine act,—an exercise of Divine power; Christ Himself performed it. It clearly follows, then, if Christ had such power over His life in assuming it, that it does not involve a higher ex-

ercise of power, or the exercise of any different power, to lay it down, and take it up, at His pleasure. He who could voluntarily assume life, in the exercise of the same power, may voluntarily lay it aside, or retain it, in defiance of all the powers of earth and hell to destroy it.

Again ; The power of Christ over His life was made manifest from the defeat which attended the efforts of His enemies to destroy it, until His appointed time had come. It would appear that Herod Antipas—the cruel and abandoned ruler who beheaded John the Baptist—had some designs upon His life. But our Lord directed the Pharisees who acquainted Him with these designs, to go and tell him that He should continue to perform miracles and teach in his territory, Galilee, until He had completed His work. What a message for a seemingly unprotected man to send back to so violent and unscrupulous a ruler ! But the secret was that He had power over His life. He knew His safety ; and that he could not perish out of Jerusalem. We have a more striking instance of our Lord's preserving His own life, in the manner in which He escaped out of the hands of the enraged inhabitants of Nazareth, the town in which he was brought up. He had preached in their synagogue ; but they were so dissatisfied with His doctrines, that a tumult was raised, and they seized Him, and drew Him to the brow of the precipitous hill, on which their city was built, to cast Him down headlong, "but," we are informed, "He passing through the midst of them, went His way." These violent men, could have no power against Him to injure a hair of his head, because it had not been given them ; and because He possessed the power of overwhelming them with sudden fear, or of miraculously taking Himself out of their hands, and rendering Himself invisible. Unmolested, according to the Gospel narrative, He went His way through a crowd of men, intent on His destruction. The hour had not come for Him to part with His life. In like manner, when the Jews, displeased with the doctrines of Christ, as related in the eighth chapter of John, took up stones to cast at Him, He "hid Himself," and went out of the temple, through the midst of His enemies. His hiding Himself must mean that He rendered Himself invisible. His answer "*I am He,*" to those who had been sent to arrest Him, in the garden, had such an effect upon them, that they went backward, and fell to the ground. It would seem that none of the band who were sent to arrest Him, with Judas at their head, knew Him, although they had brought torches and lanterns, to assist them in making the arrest. He would teach them that His life could not be wrested from Him ; that He must consent to lay it down of Himself ; that with one of His own disciples for their guide, and lights to distinguish Him, He could make them not to know Him. And, then, as if more signally to expose the folly of all this array of power to take Him into custody, the very words, "*I am He,*" by

which He made Himself known as the object of their search, struck the soldiers down with amazement and fear, as if they had fallen by the weapons of a conquering foe. And after He had permitted the band of soldiers to take Him, He told His disciples that He could have, if He desired it, more than twelve legions of angels for His protection. It was not helplessness;—it was not for want of power to preserve His life, that he yielded Himself to His enemies. In the judgment-hall of Pilate, He fearlessly proclaimed to that unjust Judge, that he could have no power against Him, except it had been given him,—given him (He meant) by the very prisoner at his bar. He stood before that tribunal, not only possessed of power, to retain his own life, but of power in an instant to overwhelm His judge, His accusers and the band of soldiers, with consternation, and utter destruction. Follow Him to the cross. There, nailed to the accursed tree, He yielded up His spirit; but it was a voluntary surrender of life. I do not mean that it was not a real death. I do not mean that the charge so often brought by the Apostles, in their preaching, against the Jews, of having killed or slain the Prince of life, was a false charge. Because He did not choose, at the time of His crucifixion, to exercise the power to retain His life, which he claims in the text, and which He had repeatedly exercised before, it did not diminish their guilt. They were just as guilty of the murder, as they would have been, if Christ had not possessed this power, or had not voluntarily laid down His life.

As we stand by the cross, what an amazing spectacle do we behold! The Prince of Life, who could say, "No man taketh my life from me, but I lay it down of myself," appears as a weak and defenceless victim, in the hands of a detachment of Roman soldiers, and closed around by a sneering, scoffing Jewish mob. We behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who might have instantly prevailed against His enemies, led as a helpless lamb to the slaughter, and as a dumb sheep before her shearers. Let us recur to the account of an eye-witness, an evangelist, who stood very near His cross. I will give you his very words: "Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scriptures might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst. Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar, and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus, therefore, had received the vinegar, He said, it is finished, and He bowed His head, and gave up the ghost." No wonder that the centurion, and those that were with him, watching Jesus, exclaimed, "Truly this was the Son of God." Not the attending circumstances merely, marvellous as they were, the earthquake, the supernatural darkness, but the manner of His death, having in it, as related in these words of an eye-witness, so much of the appearance of a voluntary surrender of life, and so much, not of the serenity or stoicism of the philosopher, but of the majesty and

compassion of a God, pointed Him out as a Being more than human. That which, in the exercise of sovereign freedom, He assumed, He consented for a time to relinquish. But He had power not only to lay it down, He had power to take it again; which leads me,

II. Secondly, to consider briefly Christ's power over His life, in resuming it, after He had laid it down, as a proof of His divinity. It is not the fact of Christ's resurrection from the dead which I feel called upon to establish. This doctrine cannot be denied by believers in the Bible, as a divine revelation. My simple object will be, taking the truth of this doctrine, as admitted, to show that a Scriptural view of the resurrection of Christ, that view particularly which is suggested by the text, involves a conspicuous proof of His deity. Our Lord claimed to possess the power of resuming His life again, after he had laid it down. The possession of such a power over the subtle principle of life, whatever may be the particular theory adopted, as to the nature of the body which was raised from the dead, must be regarded as a conclusive proof of His divinity. Even on the unscriptural theory, that the material body of Christ was not raised, and that no body whatever was raised from His tomb, but that a spiritual or psychical body was eliminated at death; I say, even on this theory, Christ's asserted power over the subtle principle of life, must be regarded as the attribute of a Being infinitely more than human.

When He laid down His life, it was a temporary surrender merely, to be revoked, not only by His own power, but at a time appointed by Himself: "Destroy this temple," meaning His body, "and in three days I will build it up." He consented to lay aside His life, for the space of three days, at the expiration of which, by His own power, He would take it again. Observe the expression, "I will raise it up." Its import is, that the resurrection of His body would be His own work, or an act of His own power. The term "I," refers to a nature in the person of Christ, which had power to raise the dead, and which, consequently, must have been a nature superior to human. "For to this end," writes Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, xiv. 9, "Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living." Here, too, His resurrection is clearly ascribed to His own power, as establishing His authority over all that shall be raised from the dead. To this end, He arose that He might be Lord of all who live again, by the same power. It is true that the resurrection of Christ, in the New Testament, is very frequently ascribed to the Father: "Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be holden of it." "This Jesus hath God raised up whereof we all are witnesses." "Him God raised up the third day, and showed Him openly." In like manner, God is styled

the Judge of the world; and yet we are most distinctly taught that Jesus Christ will judge the world at the last day; that the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment to the Son. The work of creation, also, is beyond all question ascribed to Christ, and yet Jehovah claims to be the creator of all things. Such representations are a signal proof that the Father and the Son are one in substance, and united in operation. On one page of the Bible we read, "Destroy this body, and in three days I will raise it up;" and on another we read that he was raised up by God. What clearer proof could be given that the Saviour is divine, and that the Father and the Son are one?

Let us then from the cross, where the Prince of Life bowed His head, and gave up the ghost, repair to His sepulchre, on the third day. The stone is no longer at the door. Lo! it is an empty sepulchre. But, who are these in white robes? They are angels commissioned to testify that Jesus is not here—that He is risen, as He said. O what a triumph when the Prince of Life marched like a conqueror through the territories of death, proclaiming, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," and planting, as He emerged, the ensign of victory upon the door of the tomb. Let others profess their faith in a human Saviour; our hope and our rejoicing are in a divine Saviour, who had power to conquer death, and rise triumphant over the grave; who, in offering Himself, strangely united both the offerer and the offering, the Priest and the sacrifice; who is even at the right hand of God, where He maketh intercession for us.

Before concluding, we ought particularly to notice what is stated in the context, as the ground of the Father's love to the Son, a recompense which the Son esteemed sufficient for all His sufferings in our behalf, namely, that the Son, as the Prince of Life, voluntarily assumed our nature, that He might lay down His life for our offences, and resume it again for our justification. It was for this voluntary act that the Father delighted in the Son; and in being thus beloved by the Father, the Son rejoiced as an abundant reward for His amazing humiliation, in assuming the form of a servant. "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life." "Have these words," asks John Howe, "a meaning? This our awful regard to the venerable greatness of Him that spake them, cannot suffer us to doubt. And if they mean anything, it is impossible they should not mean something most profound and great, worthy of the great, all-comprehending, central, original Being, from whence all things spring, and wherein all terminate. Here is some gradual reticement of the veiled *arcana* of the Divine Being—if we may allude to the inscription in an Egyptian temple, '*I am all that was, and is, and shall be; and who is he that shall draw aside my veil.*' Here is in some part a withdrawing of that sacred veil, by Him, to whom by prerogative, it belonged, and of whom it is said, 'No

man hath seen God at any time, but the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." Here is some disclosure of the mystery of God the Father, and of Christ the Mediator, of God and man united in one in order to the reconciliation of the holy and blessed God, with unholy and miserable man. God loved the world. Through the riches of his inconceivable goodness—a most intense, vehement love towards the whole race of intelligent creatures—He was powerfully inclined that they should not only be saved, but he made 'sons.' But, at the same time, an inflexible regard to the eternal, immutable principles of right and wrong, had also a fixed, everlasting seat in the mind of God. Mercy would save; justice condemned. It was here that the free consent of one of the highest dignity, His own beloved Son, was proposed and accepted to assume the nature of the guilty, and lay down His life for their redemption. To the all-comprehending mind, where ends and means lie connected in one permanent eternal view, this course presented itself, and was, therefore, eternally determined, by easy concert between the Father and Son. And who can doubt but this course was indispensably necessary to this end? The Father loveth the Son; and the Son declares that he is beloved of the Father, because He freely consented to make atonement, by His own death in our nature, for the sins of our apostate race. And this delight of the Father in the Son, is the Son's all-sufficient recompense for all that He suffered in the work of human redemption."

My hearers, if such is the love of the Father to the Son, for His love towards us, what love ought we to exercise towards Him who died for us? * * * * *

Finally, the subject has led us to consider a most encouraging truth, namely, Christ's power over life, as illustrated in His own death and resurrection. It is a truth which ought to revive our hearts, and from which may be derived the highest benefit. Sooner or later, we shall all be called to part with life. "There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death; and there is no discharge in that war." Death is a solemn hour. Religion, although it may prepare us for this dread event, and fortify the soul to meet it, is, at the same time, designed to foster in us the most solemn thoughts in view of it, and the momentous issues which it involves. We are, perhaps, more liable to allow our dread of death to have too great an influence over us, than we are to regard it as an event of trivial importance. Some of the most consistent believers, through fear of death, are all their life-time subject to bondage. They have a constitutional timidity. For the consolation of such, and of all believers, we are expressly taught that our Redeemer took part of flesh and blood, that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who, through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject

to bondage. Christ, my brethren, by His death, destroyed the power of death. Never was an enemy more completely vanquished. Christ laid down His life of Himself. As it was a voluntary act, and not a forced surrender, death was as effectually conquered as he would have been if Christ had refused to part with His life, and had actually come down from His cross, in view of His insulting foes, delivering Himself, as He had repeatedly done, from their power. If, then, the power of death has been destroyed, trust, O believer, in Him by whom it was destroyed. Make Him more and more precious, and you may lie down upon the pillow of death with composure, and look the last enemy in the face as a vanquished foe.

But the power of death was destroyed, not only when the Redeemer laid down His life, the victory was forever completed when he took it again, and His raised body became its demonstration and everlasting monument. In proof that His surrender was voluntary, and that he could set the last enemy at utter defiance, after three days, according to His word, He victoriously reclaimed that of which He had made a voluntary relinquishment. He arose triumphant from the grave. By the same power, at the last day, He will rife the tombs where His children slumber. Fear not, then, Christian, fear not the grave. "Marvel not at this, for the hour is coming in the which all that are in their graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of damnation." Amen.

SERMON DCCIV.

BY REV. JAMES M. MACDONALD, D.D.,

PRINCETON, N. J.

CHRISTIAN MODERATION.

"Let your moderation be known unto all men; the Lord is at hand."—PHILIPPIANS iv. 5.

If the rejoicing to which we are exhorted in the preceding verse were earthly rejoicing, then moderation, in its ordinary sense, might seem to express the Apostle's meaning in this precept. But it is rejoicing *in the Lord* which needs no such special limitations, nor cautions against excess. There can be no undue vehemence in such rejoicing.