

# Lincoln at Prayer

by Elton Trueblood

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*Abraham Lincoln's reverence for prayer and his own practice of prayer were influenced by his mother's death and his growing recognition of God as personal.*

**Scripture:** 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 51:17, Matthew 6:6, Luke 18:1, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, 1 Timothy 2:1, James 5:16

**Topics:** "Prayer Life", "Faith Formation"

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## Description

Elton Trueblood delves into the deep religious experiences of Abraham Lincoln, highlighting his profound faith in God and the power of prayer. Lincoln's personal practice of prayer, from seeking guidance to expressing gratitude, is evident throughout his life, shaping his character and decisions. Despite facing immense burdens and challenges, Lincoln maintained a genuine and deep piety, seeking God's will and guidance in all aspects of his life. His theology of prayer focused on understanding God's will and seeking divine mercy and blessings for the nation, emphasizing humility, repentance, and unity in prayer.

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## Transcript

I have sought His aid.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

On October 5, 1818, Nancy Lincoln died. The disease which killed the pioneer mother was known locally as "milk sick." In the late summer and early autumn the hungry cattle were attracted to a plant called white snake root, which grew in shady places in the forest and which produced clusters of chalk-white flowers. When the cows ate enough of the flowers they developed "trembles" and three days later were dead. Humans who drank the milk from these cows were themselves stricken. One of the cows belonging to Thomas Lincoln showed signs of the trembles and soon his neighbor, Thomas Sparrow, died of the disease. Mrs. Sparrow was fatally stricken also, and then Nancy, after she had nursed some of the neighbors, became herself a victim.

Dennis Hanks reported the tragedy as he remembered it.<sup>1</sup> Of

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the thirty-six-year-old woman he said, "She knew she was going to die and called up the children to her dying side and told them to be good and kind to their father -- to one another and to the world, expressing

a hope that they might live as they had been taught by her to live . . . love -- reverence and worship God." This scene left a deep impression on Nancy's nine-year-old boy and his older sister, Sarah. Finally, the desperately sick woman spoke directly to her young son, as follows: "I am going away from you, Abraham, and I shall not return. I know that you will be a good boy, that you will be kind to Sarah and to your father. I want you to live as I have taught you, and to love your Heavenly Father."

The sorrowful scene in the Indiana forest was never erased from Abraham Lincoln's memory. Years later, when Willie died in the White House, the grief-stricken President spoke to the nurse, Mrs. Pomeroy, saying: "I had a good Christian mother, and her prayers have followed me thus far through life." In his own practice of prayer, Lincoln thought of himself as maintaining a trust which had been laid upon him by his dying mother. The determination to be faithful to a trust was one of the most prominent features of Lincoln's mature character.

The evidence of Abraham Lincoln's own practice of personal prayer is so abundant that no thoughtful person can deny it. He prayed alone, and he called the nation to prayer; he prayed for guidance, and he prayed in gratitude; he prayed in defeat, and he prayed in victory. Often noted was his reverence when others engaged in vocal prayer.<sup>2</sup> Along with his unashamed reverence, however, went a large measure of reticence. Though Mrs. Pomeroy said that she heard the President praying aloud in the White House, we have no text of any vocal prayer uttered by him. Something of his reticence is indicated by the fact that when he attended with regularity the weekly prayer meeting at the New York

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Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, he elected to sit unseen in the pastor's study with the door ajar. The President told his pastor, Dr. Phineas D. Gurley, that he received important help from these unostentatious gatherings, chiefly because they were characterized more by prayer than by the making of speeches. By this time in his life, with countless heavy burdens upon him, Lincoln had entirely outgrown juvenile delight in religious argument. Talking with God seemed to the mature Lincoln more important than talking about Him.

On Sundays at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, President Lincoln showed his personal respect for vocal prayer by standing during the pastoral prayer, as did a number of other men who were present. William Henry Roberts, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian General Assembly, reported on Lincoln's attitude in worship. "I was seated," he said, "not far from Mr. Lincoln at Sunday services for a year and a half, and his attitude was always that of an earnest and devout worshiper."

As a supplement to the record provided by outside observers, we have in some instances Lincoln's own account of his practice of prayer. A good example is included in his famous letter to Mrs. Lydia Bixby in which he reported his own personal prayer. "I pray," he wrote, "that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the alter of Freedom."<sup>3</sup> The widow, we now know, had lost only two sons rather than five as originally reported, but this does not alter the appeal of Lincoln's prayerful response. On the whole it is better to trust Lincoln than his reporters. Mrs. Pomeroy could have been mistaken when she said that she had heard the President praying aloud, but the evidence provided by the man himself is dependable.

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Fortunately, we have the cumulative testimony of many different people converging on a single point, one of these reporters being Lincoln's own wife. She said that on the morning of the first inauguration Lincoln read the conclusion of his address to the assembled family and then, when they had withdrawn from the room, prayed audibly for strength and guidance. Noah Brooks reported that the President, after entering the White House and in spite of the demands of a busy schedule, observed daily the practice of prayer. "Sometimes," said Brooks, "it was only ten words, but those ten words he had." His chief private secretary, John Nicolay, who had a better opportunity than most people to know the truth about Lincoln's personal devotional habits, was unequivocal in his testimony. "Mr. Lincoln," he said, "was a praying man. I know that to be a fact and I have heard him request people to pray for him, which he would never have done had he not believed that prayer is answered . . . I have heard him say that he prayed."<sup>4</sup>

The conclusion we are bound to reach as we face the accumulated evidence is that Lincoln's piety, though subdued, was genuine and deep. Something of the depth was revealed on the way to the burial of Willie, when the President said, "I will try to go to God with my sorrows." The national leader on his knees was a model vividly presented to Lincoln in his early boyhood when he read Weems' *Life of Washington*, and learned the story of how Isaac Potts found General Washington praying at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777. Present-day visitors to the National Cathedral in Washington are sometimes reminded of the scene in the woods near Valley Forge when they study the statue of Lincoln kneeling at prayer. The statue is the creation of the sculptor, Herbert S. Houch, who was influenced by a report of his own grandfather. Whether the scene is historical we do not know. But we do know what Lincoln, perhaps engaging in a figure of

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speech, confided to his intended secretary, Noah Brooks. "I have," he said, "been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go."<sup>5</sup>

Our most reliable knowledge of Lincoln's experience of prayer comes from the war years, yet there are many instances of the intensity of his experience of prayer in earlier periods. Thus, on October 30, 1858, as he was concluding his strenuous campaign in the senatorial race against Stephen A. Douglas, he told of his own anguish which had been involved in his decision to try for high office. He said that if the restriction on the extension of slavery could have been retained, he would have remained in private life. The reference to prayer was in connection with this hard personal decision. "God knows," he said, "how sincerely I prayed from the first that this field of ambition might not be opened."<sup>6</sup>

The major change regarding prayer, which came with the awesome responsibility of national leadership, lay not in the fact that he prayed, for this he had done before, but rather that he became able to speak of prayer openly and with an entire absence of embarrassment. Though never flamboyant about it, he was finally able, when the occasion warranted, to speak freely about the deepest experiences of his life.

One of the most humbling yet supporting of the experiences which came to Lincoln was that of knowing that others were praying for him. At the beginning of his most discouraging year, Senator Harlan brought to Lincoln a message from the Quakers of Iowa, to which the President replied on January 5, 1862. "It is," he said, "most cheering and encouraging for me to know that in the efforts which I have made, and am making, for the restoration of a righteous peace to our country, I am upheld and sustained by the good wishes and prayers of God's people."<sup>7</sup>

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It is no surprise to the modern student of Lincoln's thought that he was sophisticated in his theology of prayer. Convinced of the radical contrast between God's wisdom and our own, he did not suppose for a moment that the prayers of a finite person can alter the infinite will. Consequently, his chief form of prayer was that of seeking to know what the will of God really is. Conscious always of his finitude, Lincoln realized that in seeking to know God's will, he might easily be mistaken. In any case he was aware that in the war somebody was mistaken. Contradiction is the perfect evidence, he thought, of human fallibility.

Part of Lincoln's realism about the difficulties of prayer arose from his early recognition that many on the other side of the conflict were themselves engaged in prayer. Indeed, he concluded that Southerners were probably praying more earnestly than the people who professed to have Union sympathies. He knew, of course, that the President of the Confederate States was a man of prayer much as he, himself, was. This we know today better than we knew earlier, as a result of Hudson Strode's careful research.

On April 23, 1865, after the war had ended, and Lincoln had been assassinated, Jefferson Davis wrote from Charlotte, North Carolina, to his wife, "I have prayed to our Heavenly Father to give me wisdom and fortitude equal to the demands of the position in which Providence has placed me."<sup>8</sup> Both sides, Lincoln realized, prayed to the same God.

Immediately after his removal to Richmond, President Davis appointed June 13, 1861, as "a day of fasting and prayer throughout the Confederacy." This preceded all of the calls to National Prayer which Lincoln was later to make. At his inauguration at Montgomery, Alabama, Davis ended his address as follows:

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"Reverently let us invoke the God of our fathers to guide and protect us in our efforts to perpetuate the principles which by His blessing they were able to vindicate, establish, and transmit to their posterity. With the continuance of His favor ever gratefully acknowledged, we may hopefully look forward to success, to peace, and to prosperity." The two Presidents differed radically in politics, but they were joined in reverence. To the delegation from the Christian forces of Chicago President Lincoln pointed out that "the rebel soldiers are praying with a great deal more earnestness, I fear, than our own troops, and expecting God to favor their side; for one of our soldiers, who had been taken prisoner, told Senator Wilson, a few days since, that he met with nothing so discouraging as the evident sincerity of those he was among in their prayers."<sup>9</sup>

A contemporary theologian, Karl A. Olsson, has noted that Lincoln's recognition of the sincerity of Southern piety was crucial for his own position. "He did not want," says Olsson, "to elevate his cause to the level of divine infallibility. He did not want the South to be damned and rejected as if it were only evil. And so, bowed down by the weight of his cares, he prayed. And the meekness of his prayer breathes in almost everything that he did."<sup>10</sup> In contrast to pronouncements which tend to be judgmental, prayer introduces men to a totally different dimension.

The fact that the prayers of the North and South obviously conflicted lent credence to a story in which President Lincoln took unusual delight. According to the common version of the story, two Quaker women, riding together on the train, began to compare the two Presidents.

"I think," said the first, "Jefferson will succeed."

"Why does thee think so?"

"Because Jefferson is a praying man."

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"And so is Abraham a praying man."

"Yes," came the punchline, "but the Lord will think Abraham is joking."

Of this, Lincoln said that it was the best story about himself that he had ever "read in the papers."<sup>11</sup> He loved it when piety and humor could be joined. That he could also combine courtesy and subtle humor is shown by the incident in which the King of Siam had offered President Buchanan, shortly before Lincoln's inauguration, a donation of elephants as breeding stock. On February 3, 1862, the straight-faced diplomat, taking care of Buchanan's correspondence, wrote:

I appreciate most highly Your Majesty's tender of good office in forwarding to this Government a stock from which a supply of elephants might be raised on our own soil. This government would not hesitate to avail itself of so generous an offer if the object were one which could be made practically useful in the present condition of the United States.

Our political jurisdiction, however, does not reach a latitude so low as to favor the multiplication of the elephants, and steam on land, as well as on water, has been our best and most efficient agent of transportation in internal commerce.<sup>12</sup>

As we contemplate such a lightness of touch, we see the point of Professor Wolf's pertinent remark, "The picture then of Lincoln in the White House as the man of prayer needs the supplement of Lincoln as the man of laughter."<sup>13</sup>

The modern reader, cognizant of the multiplicity of demands upon Lincoln, may be surprised to learn that the Chief Executive found some time to deepen his spiritual life by reading from the devotional classics. We have evidence that he did so. Of all the

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interpreters of the inner life, few have equaled Richard Baxter (1615-1691). Baxter is famous both for his own Autobiography and his devotional guide, *Saint's Everlasting Rest*. Much that he wrote was produced during the turmoil of the English Civil War and some of it reached the mind of a thoughtful leader in the Civil War of America. The evidence that Lincoln read Baxter consists of an extract, written in his own hand.<sup>14</sup> The topic is the conflict between doubt and assurance, and conflict which we know was never totally resolved in Lincoln's mind. We must remember that Lincoln was never wholly free from melancholy, and this was something which the Puritan scholar understood very well. Baxter taught that, while doubt cannot be expelled, it can be subdued. This was Lincoln's experience exactly. The quoted passage, as printed by Barton, is: "It is more pleasing to God to see His people study Him and His will directly, than to spend the first and chief of their effort about attaining comfort for themselves. We have faith given us principally that we might believe and live by it in daily applications of Christ. You may believe immediately (by God's help) but getting assurance of it may be the work of a great part of your life."

By study of the quotation we obtain an important insight into Lincoln's theology. The copied words show that Lincoln was more concerned with the effort to know God's will than he was with the problem of his own personal salvation of his own soul, his theology was marked by objectivity. He overcame his own

melancholy, not by taking his own spiritual temperature, but by finding a work to do which made him forget himself.

The period of Lincoln's second election, though not as much a time of strain as the autumn two years before, was nevertheless,

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one which caused Lincoln to draw upon his deepest resources. The President fully believed for a while that he would not be reelected. There was ample precedent for this expectation. He became, in fact, the first President from one of the Northern states to be twice elected. His opponent, General George McClellan, while carrying only three states, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Delaware, received almost 45 percent of the popular vote. Lincoln was grateful for the confidence of those who supported him so loyally in his difficult task, but he was deeply sobered by the fact that almost two million of his fellow countrymen had voted against him. An especially bitter blow was the loss of Sangamon County, in which he had lived for many years.

When the election was over, the President responded with one of his memorable affirmations of where his strength lay. "I should," he said, "be the veriest shallow and self-conceited blockhead upon the footstool, if, in my discharge of the duties which are put upon me in this place, I should hope to get along without the wisdom which comes from God and not from men." Lincoln said this to Noah Brooks on November 11, 1864. His reference to the earth as the footstool is one of the many indications of the influence of the Bible upon his speech. He knew this term well, because its use in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:35) is only one of several in the Scriptures.

The conversation with Brooks, together with the practice of prayer, helps the student of Lincoln's thinking to understand better his conception of God. It is admitted by all that he grew, but in what direction did he grow? Nearly all the evidence shows that he grew conspicuously in his recognition of God as personal. At one time Lincoln was quoted, in a private conversation, as saying that his conception of God was the same as that of nature, and therefore impersonal.<sup>15</sup> It is conceivable that he once made such a remark, but the weight of evidence is consistently at variance

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with this report. Increasingly, he felt that he was dealing, not with some impersonal Force able neither to know nor to care, but with One who guides tirelessly toward the fulfillment of His purpose. Only in this intellectual context does the idea of man as an instrument of God's will make sense.

We understand Lincoln's conception of God far better if we pay close attention, not to what he said in argument or in banter, but to the logical implications of his own practice, particularly the practice of prayer and his calls to prayer on the part of his fellow citizens. In prayer he combined the search for guidance with humble thanks. Both of these are meaningless unless the relationship to God can be a truly personal one, which, following Martin Buber, we now call an "I-Thou relationship." One cannot thank a Force; thanksgiving is unreasonable except in a personal connection.

Lincoln's own accounts of how he was led to turn to prayer as his greatest resource give us the clearest picture we have of his understanding of the Divine-human encounter. To the Baltimore Presbyterian Synod he confided more intimately than was his usual custom when he said, "I was early brought to a

living reflection that nothing in my power whatever, in others to rely upon, would succeed without the direct assistance of the Almighty." It was in connection with these intimate remarks that the humble man said words which belong to the classic literature of witness, "I have often wished that I was a more devout man than I am." Following them came his account of his own major decision: "Nevertheless, amid the greatest difficulties of my Administration, when I could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance in God."<sup>16</sup>

Many have wondered why William H. Herndon, the Springfield lawyer who wrote voluminously about Lincoln after his

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assassination, could have referred to his former law partner as an unbeliever. The answer to this question lies partly in the character of Herndon, who overreacted to the claims of some that Lincoln was an orthodox Christian. But, more importantly, Herndon failed to understand because he did not really know Lincoln in the crucial years when the agony of decision drove him to spiritual depths which he had not formerly experienced. What we now know is that the four years of heavy responsibility, when the temptation to waver was never-ending, were also years of growth. Allan Nevins has reminded us that Lincoln's burden was made even more onerous because he had had no previous experience in administration.<sup>17</sup> It is really no wonder that he said God was his only hope.

One aspect of Lincoln's theology, which disturbed some of his Illinois neighbors, was his conviction that God would not in the end be defeated, even by man's sin and foolishness. Consequently, he said he could not believe that the omnipotent love of God is consistent with vindictiveness or "the endless punishment of any one of the human race." This he affirmed in his office in Springfield as late as 1859. But it would be a serious mistake to infer from such a remark that Lincoln denied the reasonableness of divine punishment. He saw punishment as parental in its object, "intended for the good of the offender," and more and more he applied this to the nation as well as to the individual person. Without this conception, much of the Second Inaugural is incomprehensible.

If Lincoln was a universalist in his conception of God's ultimate victory, he was not one to draw from this the practical conclusion of softness. Indeed, he said it would be better if preachers would talk less of pardon for sin and more of punishment. As Professor Wolf has observed, this was "the prophetic

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note of a God of mercy Who punishes the sins of men in the judgments of history with a view to reformation."<sup>18</sup> In short, following what he considered to be the essential teaching of Christ, and accepting what he called "the provisions of the gospel system," Lincoln was able to include, in the magnitude of his thought, both sternness and hope. Certainly he did not fall into the heresy described by Archbishop William Temple, which involves "a conception of God as so genially tolerant as to be morally indifferent."<sup>19</sup> Lincoln understood God, whom he faced directly in personal encounter, not as One who is morally indifferent, but as the Infinite Person who gives meaning to the moral order. This provided the note of sternness from which Lincoln never wavered, even though he also believed in God's ultimate triumph. It is this theological context which gives meaning to Lincoln's best-known quotation from Thomas Jefferson, "I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just!" There was a wide difference in theology between Jefferson and Lincoln, but on this point they were agreed.<sup>20</sup> Because both men accepted the idea of "God's eternal justice," they did not hesitate to speak of God's "wrath." More and more, as Lincoln

engaged in both prayer and thought, he became convinced that the Civil War had to be understood in such terms.

During his forty-nine months in the presidency Abraham Lincoln issued nine separate calls to public penitence, fasting, prayer, and thanksgiving. These calls have not received the attention which they deserve. Seen together they reveal with remarkable clarity both the growth and the depth of the man's inner life. Study of these documents is, indeed, a self-justifying undertaking. They are important in what they reveal, not only about

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Abraham Lincoln, but also about the total American experiment. Though these are relatively unknown, they demonstrate almost as well as the famous speeches the grandeur of Lincoln's mature style, both in thought and in expression. He was breaking new ground and he was aware that he was doing so.

Lincoln produced his first public call to prayer on August 12, 1861, the day assigned being the last Thursday in September. The pattern, thus established in Lincoln's first year as President, of calling for a special observance on Thursday, was continued with only two exceptions. One advantage of choosing Thursday was that this day in the middle of the week was not identified with any existing worshiping group. Thus it could belong equally to all of the people, regardless of denominational affiliations. The people were called, not as churchmen, but as Americans! The distribution of the special proclamations was as follows; 1861, two; 1862, one; 1863, three; 1864, three. Just before his death, as his last public address tells us, Lincoln was contemplating a tenth such Proclamation. Only three days before he was shot, the President made his reverent purpose known to the people. "The evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond," he said, "and the surrender of the principal insurgent army, give hope of a righteous and speedy peace whose joyous expression can not be restrained. In the midst of this, however, He, from Whom all blessings flow, must not be forgotten. A call for a national thanksgiving is being prepared, and will be duly promulgated."<sup>21</sup>

The first of the nine calls to prayer was suggested and even requested by a joint committee of both Houses of Congress. Recommended was "a day of public humiliation, prayer and fasting to be observed by the people of the United States." This first Proclamation had no hint of rejoicing, for there was, in fact, nothing about which the people could reasonably rejoice. What

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was required, Lincoln concluded, was not boasting but humility. In his eloquent development of this theme we sense one of the first intimations of the new Lincoln style which was to emerge from the fire of disappointment.

Lincoln's own part in the memorable pronouncement<sup>22</sup> began with the recognition that "it is fit and becoming in all people, at all times, to acknowledge and revere the Supreme Government of God; to bow in humble submission to his chastisements; to confess and deplore their sins and transgressions in the full conviction that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and to pray, with all fervency and contrition, for the pardon of their past offences, and for a blessing upon their present and prospective action." Here is no suggestion of vindictiveness toward the people of the Confederacy and not one judgmental line. In this first "National Fast Day," the emphasis was upon personal contrition rather than upon blame of others.

This remarkable literary production provides us with a direct insight into Lincoln's own theology of anguish, in which he saw all Americans involved. He understood the war, not as an accident of history, but as a "terrible visitation" revealing "the hand of God." In the following paragraph, Abraham Lincoln was revealing both to his contemporaries and to future generations his own deepest conviction about God and man.

And whereas when our own beloved Country, once, by blessing of God, united, prosperous, and happy, is now afflicted with factions and civil war, it is peculiarly fit for us to recognize the hand of God in this terrible visitation, and in sorrowful remembrance of our own faults and crimes as a nation and as individuals, to humble ourselves before Him, and to pray for His mercy, -- to pray that we may be spared further punishment, though most justly deserved; that our arms may be blessed and made effectual for the re-establishment of law, order, and peace, through the wide extent of our country; and that the inestimable

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boon of civil and religious liberty, earned under His guidance and blessing, by the labors and sufferings of our fathers, may be restored in all its original excellence.

Here, in the authentic form, is the Lincoln style of the final chapter of his life. By this time, whatever personal pride he had ever had was thoroughly chastened and he could refer to prayer in a completely unapologetic fashion. The entire purpose of the effort was "to the end that the united prayer of the nation may ascend to the Throne of Grace and bring down plentiful blessings upon our Country." Prayer, in the President's mind, had by August 12, 1861, become an experience of genuine magnitude. It included both petitions and praise; it began with repentance, but it did not end there; it was as meaningful for a whole people as for a solitary individual.

No really important call was made in the bleak year of 1862, but by March 30, 1863, the new Lincoln showed himself with both moral and literary grandeur. Again, as in 1861, the President called for a "National Fast Day." The day assigned was Thursday, April 30. This occasion was initiated by the United States Senate, which in a resolution requested the President to set apart a day for "National prayer and humiliation." It is important to remember that the Emancipation Proclamation had been put into effect three months prior to the new proclamation, and that the turning point of the Battle of Gettysburg was still three months in the future. The outcome at this time was therefore far from certain. But in spite of uncertainty about the outcome, there was no uncertainty about the conviction. Accordingly, here, in the spring of 1863, two years prior to his death, we find the grandeur of Lincoln's written style which subsequent generations have learned to associate with his name. "And whereas," he said, "it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their

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sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord."

What were the national sins of which the Chief Magistrate was painfully conscious? They were the sins of pride, arising from the conviction of self-sufficiency. "Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!" The prayer requested was the double one, "the pardon of our national sins, and the restoration of our now divided and suffering Country." Terrible as it was, the ordeal might, Lincoln

believed, turn into a blessing if it could induce true humility. With this high hope in mind, the call was made as follows:

Now, therefore, in compliance with the request, and fully concurring in the views of the Senate, I do, by this proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30th day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting and prayer. And I do hereby request all the people to abstain, on that day, from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord, and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.<sup>23</sup>

After Gettysburg, President Lincoln's expressions, in his Proclamations, were a little less somber in that he referred not only to "sorrow," but also to "triumph." The call for Thursday, August 6, 1863, was not for a Fast Day, but for a day devoted to "Thanksgiving, Praise and Prayer." Another innovation, after Gettysburg, was a reference to the "insurgents." What he asked for, however, was not judgment upon them, but prayer for a change in their hearts. He asked the citizens to pray, specifically,

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for God "to subdue the anger, which has produced, and so long sustained a needless and cruel rebellion, to change the hearts of the insurgents, to guide the counsels of the Government with wisdom adequate to so great a national emergency, and to visit with tender care and consolation throughout the length and breadth of our land all those who, through the vicissitudes of marches, voyages, battles and sieges, have been brought to suffer in mind, body or estate, and finally to lead the whole nation, through the paths of repentance and submission to the Divine Will, back to the perfect enjoyment of Union and fraternal peace."<sup>24</sup>

The style of these three Proclamations is very impressive. It is vastly superior to that of the First Inaugural, indicating remarkable growth in only a few months. In the calls to prayer Lincoln became independent of Seward's tutelage, as he was not when the First Inaugural was composed. Today, as we read William Seward's own writings, we are aware, of course, that we are in contact with a fine clear mind, but his literary sense was slight in comparison with that of the mature and independent Lincoln. Many have noted Lincoln's capacity for growth, but no one expressed it better than did his one-time critic, Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune. "Never before," he said, "did one so constantly and visibly grow under the discipline of incessant cares, anxieties and trials. The Lincoln of '62 was plainly a larger, broader, better man than he had been in '61; while '63 and '64 worked his continued and unabated growth in mental and moral stature."<sup>25</sup>

While Lincoln's growth was evident in many phases of his life, it was especially so in the development of his religious thinking.

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The magnificence of the Fast Day Proclamations arises from this kind of growth as much as it stems from the increased capacity for nobility of expression. He was able to write nobly about prayer, because prayer had come to dominate his thinking. The idea that there could be direct communication between finite minds and the Infinite Mind had become, for Lincoln, an idea of overwhelming magnitude.

The special call to thanksgiving, as well as to prayer, which came after the victory at Gettysburg, provided an introduction for the first annual Thanksgiving observed later in 1863. Thanksgiving Day, as we know it now, was never known prior to Lincoln's decision. There had, of course, been sporadic celebrations, dating back to the early plantations in both Virginia and Massachusetts, but these were in no sense national or regularized. Though some of the states had made experiments along this line, the celebrations achieved only local significance. Lincoln, himself, made a local beginning on the last Thursday of November, 1861, but the announcement came only one day in advance, and those addressed included only the residents of Washington and Georgetown.<sup>26</sup> In his first year of office this was all that occurred to the harassed President, so far as a November observance was concerned. In November, 1862, which was still a time of severe strain, nothing was done in this connection. In 1863, however, all was different. In that momentous year, the year of the Gettysburg Address, the President inaugurated a practice of far-reaching significance, which has been continued by all of his successors to the present day.

The credit for the modern conception of Thanksgiving as an established National Festival belongs primarily to an otherwise obscure woman, Sara Josepha Hale. On September 28, 1863, Miss Hale, "Editress of the Lady's Book," wrote to the President requesting

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a few minutes of his time in order to lay before him "a subject of deep interest." Her proposal was simply that the scattered celebrations of Thanksgiving be unified into "a National and fixed Union Festival." Since the idea appealed to Lincoln, there was issued on October 3, 1863, the first of many such Proclamations. In the rush of duties Lincoln assigned to Seward some of the task of writing this document, with the result that it is not equal, in literary appeal, to the two Fast Day Proclamations.

The first National Thanksgiving Proclamation includes the now familiar Lincoln themes of the sternness of the moral law and of God's mercy. Our eyes are directed to "the Most High God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." What is expressed is an almost perfect balance between gratitude, penitence, and compassion. The people are called, says the Proclamation, not only to give thanks for "singular deliverances and blessings," but also to "humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience." The people, finally, are asked to "commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union."<sup>27</sup>

The first Thanksgiving Proclamation is revealing in what it does not say. No longer are people asked to assemble in their customary places of worship. The citizens are not called to prayer as Protestants or Jews or Roman Catholics, but as members of a common family. Where they gather is not important! Any secular building would be entirely suitable for this high purpose. Though the new conception is unashamedly religious,

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it is in no sense ecclesiastical. Lincoln was taking seriously the idea which had grown upon him for a long time, that God is able to call a nation. God, he believed, calls a nation to service, especially that of liberation from bondage of all kinds, but He also calls the nation to prayer. It was Lincoln's mature conclusion that, if the people are not obedient to the latter, they will not long be obedient to the former.

After years of mental struggle, Abraham Lincoln was at last performing a prophetic role. With characteristic honesty, he did not ask the people to engage in practices in which he did not, himself, engage.

It seemed that the war would never end. After the jubilation of part of 1863, and the elevated emotion at the Gettysburg Battlefield in November, there was a general sense of despair. Thousands of good men, the same kind of men, were killed on both sides, and the end seemed always to be unattainable. Accordingly, both Houses of Congress joined in a resolution on July 2, 1864, asking for yet another day of "humiliation and prayer by the people of the United States." Lincoln willingly concurred, and the authentic Lincoln style appeared again. This time, with absolute simplicity, he called the day a "Day of Prayer." The date assigned was the first Thursday in August.

The Proclamation dated July 7, 1864, carries further the brooding thoughts of the Fast Day Proclamations, revealing with accuracy the inner life of the man in the White House. Like others, Lincoln had had to face the possibility of failure of his grandest hopes. Perhaps the American Union would be permanently fractured and the continent Balkanized. Perhaps, after eighty-eight years, the dream could fade. In the light of such realism Lincoln asked his fellow citizens to pray earnestly to Almighty God and "to implore Him, as the Supreme Ruler of the World, not to destroy us as a people, nor suffer us to be destroyed by the hostility or connivance of other Nations, or by obstinate adherence to our own counsels, which may be in conflict with His

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eternal purposes, and to implore Him to enlighten the mind of the Nation to know and do His will; humbly believing that it is in accordance with His will that our place should be maintained as a united people among the family of nations."<sup>28</sup> If any person sincerely desires to know what Abraham Lincoln really believed, the Proclamation which he made one year after the Battle of Gettysburg will provide the answer. Never, until the very end, was the conviction of a holy calling for an entire people more brilliantly expressed.

The last of Lincoln's nine calls to prayer was written October 20, 1864, again setting apart the last Thursday of November as a time of National Thanksgiving. Miss Hale had, on October 9, written to Secretary Seward, encouraging a repetition of the action of a year before and enclosing proof of her article on the subject which was due to appear in the November issue of the *Lady's Book*. "I send," she wrote, "a copy of the proof for the President. You will greatly oblige me by handing this to him and acquainting him with the contents of this letter. I do not like to trouble him with a note. Should the president see fit to issue his proclamation at once, the important paper would reach the knowledge of American citizens in Europe and Asia, as well as throughout our wide land."

The President responded at once, dating his last Proclamation of this character October 20, 1864. The Proclamation, which was relatively brief, was remarkable chiefly for its opening sentence, which was an unadorned statement of the fact that total disaster, feared by so many, had not occurred. "It has pleased Almighty God," the Proclamation began, "to prolong our national life another year." The document reflects no easy optimism, but neither does it reflect despair. "He has been pleased," wrote Lincoln, "to animate and inspire our minds and hearts with fortitude, courage

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and resolution sufficient for the great trial of civil war into which we have been brought by our own adherence as a nation to the cause of Freedom and Humanity, and to afford to us reasonable hopes of an ultimate and happy deliverance from all our dangers and afflictions."29

Valuable as the public Proclamations are, they represent only one of many sources for our knowledge of the depths of Abraham Lincoln's religious experience. What is increasingly obvious is that he attempted to express a faith for the entire people, regardless of denominational affiliation. His appeal was directed to Jews as well as to Christians. He did not hesitate, on some occasions, to refer to Christ as the "savior." But as President of the whole people he sought to point primarily to the One whom Christ revealed, and who, he believed, is the Father of all.

Abraham Lincoln was not a religious leader in the conventional sense. Certainly he was not professionally religious and he had no formal theological training. What he knew about prayer came not from books, but from experience, much of it agonizing. He was no flaming prophet like John the Baptist, nor was he an ecstatic arouser of men's emotions, like the Mahdi. He was, instead, as Horace Greeley said, "a plain, true, earnest patriotic man, gifted with common sense." What lifted him above others of this type was the overwhelming conviction that God's will could be partly known and that the only hope for finite men lay in conformity to that will. His deepest conviction about prayer was that which he expressed on March 30, 1863, when he appealed to his fellow citizens to "rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings."30

#### Chapter Five || Table of Contents

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1. The report of Dennis Hanks is in the Herndon-Weik manuscript. The report was made June 13, 1865. Hanks was the adopted son of Thomas Sparrow. For a full account of the sickness and death of Nancy Lincoln see Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth: Indiana years, seven to twenty-one*, 1959. [BACK]
2. One report of this is provided in the *Life and Letters of Elizabeth L. Comstock*, 1895. [BACK]
3. *Collected Works*, VIII, p. 117. [BACK]
4. For Nicolay's statement see William E. Curtis, *The True Abraham Lincoln*, pp. 385, 386. [BACK]
5. See Noah Brooks, *Harper's Monthly*, July 1865. [BACK]
6. *Collected Works*, III, p. 334. [BACK]
7. *Nicolay and Hay*, VI, p. 327. [BACK]
8. Strode, *Private Letters of Jefferson Davis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), p. 157. Also *Jefferson Davis, Tragic Hero* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. 1964), p. 201. [BACK]
9. *Collected Works*, V, p. 420. [BACK]
10. *Olsson, Passion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 28. [BACK]
11. One version appeared in the *Salem (Illinois) Advertiser*, November 19, 1863, the same day as that of the Gettysburg Address. [BACK]

12. Collected Works, V. p. 126. [BACK]
13. Lincoln's Religion, p. 140. [BACK]
14. See William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, pp. 289, 290. Barton affirmed that he owned the half page of note paper, but he was in error in referring to the ownership by Winfield Smith, a one-time member of Lincoln's Cabinet. Barton may have meant to refer to Caleb Blood Smith, Lincoln's Secretary of the Interior, who died in December, 1862. [BACK]
15. For this incident see Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, The War Years*, III, p. 381. [BACK]
16. Collected Works, VI, pp. 535, 536. [BACK]
17. *Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address*, edited by Allan Nevins (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 4. (Hereafter called Nevins.) [BACK]
18. Lincoln's Religion, p. 105. [BACK]
19. *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1934), p. 456. [BACK]
20. The reference to Jefferson came in a long address at Columbus, Ohio, on September 16, 1859. See *Collected Works*, III, p. 410. [BACK]
21. *Collected Works*, VIII, pp. 399, 400. [BACK]
22. *Collected Works*, IV, p. 482. [BACK]
23. *Collected Works*, VI, p. 156. [BACK]
24. *Ibid.*, p. 332. [BACK]
25. Greeley's address on Lincoln was published (in 1888?) nearly twenty years after his own death in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, XLII, pp. 371-382. The statement printed here appears on p. 381. [BACK]
26. For the brief announcement see *Collected Works*, V, p. 32. [BACK]
27. *Collected Works*, VI, p. 497. [BACK]
28. *Collected Works*, VII, p. 431. [BACK]
29. *Collected Works*, VIII, p. 55. [BACK]
30. *Collected Works*, VI, p. 156. [BACK]

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