

Abraham Lincoln's **DAILY TREASURE**

Moments of Faith with America's Favorite President

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Thomas Freiling, ed., *Abraham Lincoln's Daily Treasure*
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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

In this book I offer the reader daily doses of Abraham Lincoln's spiritual and moral axioms equaling a year's worth of godly advice from America's greatest president. I call them daily treasures, first, because many of them are based on a nineteenth-century devotional book used by Lincoln during the Civil War entitled *The Believer's Daily Treasure*. The second reason I call them treasures is because they will make you rich. Read them and you'll abound in godly wisdom and spiritual truth.

This book does not argue or contend. It does not build a case for or against what Lincoln believed about religion. Opinions based on evidence that seems to point in different directions vary widely and did even when he was alive. But this book does not weigh that evidence. That kind of scrutiny is best left to scholars and historians. I certainly have my own views, which I'll share with you. But my aim in this book is not to analyze. It is to inspire and motivate, to stir your soul with spiritual nuggets of the things Lincoln said and wrote about God, prayer, faith, and morality.

Lincoln's life was no easy road. He was poverty-stricken, self-taught, and for much of his life, a failure. He grieved the loss of his mother and two sons. He was homely and awkward. Yet he somehow got through it, rising above the depths of depression to become one of history's most venerable figures. From a lowly frontiersman to commander in chief and emancipator,

Lincoln grew in stature until the day of his death. Even today his image looms larger than life on the landscape of American history. If ever an American statesman reached a legendary, almost immortal status, it was Lincoln. Leo Tolstoy called him “a Christ in miniature.”

This book gives you the proverbs of this great man, Abraham Lincoln, along with my own remarks and observations relating them to our lives today. This book will help you answer the question “What would Lincoln do?” Indeed, what Lincoln said 150 years ago does apply today. Like the Scripture itself, Lincoln’s words are alive with the truth. They have a “perpetual freshness” and will live “as long as the conscience and memory of man,” according to Lincoln archivist Archer Shaw.

If you’re struggling to overcome the odds, if you’ve experienced great grief or loss in your life, or if it looks like you’re about to lose a job or promotion, let Lincoln’s words forge a way out. If you struggle to be honest, loyal, or humble, let Lincoln go to work on your character. If you give no time to God, struggle to find God’s will. If you have no need of God’s Word, let Lincoln stir your soul.

I discovered *The Believer’s Daily Treasure* while browsing the dusty shelves of a used-book store. You see, I’m a rare book collector. While others spend their time on the golf course, I can be found at antiquarian book shops. I especially like to collect books about American history and government, probably because of my career in Washington, D.C., at the United States House of Representatives.

The small devotional, originally published in England in 1852, was filled with Scripture, prose, and poetry for every day of the year. This particular edition of *The Believer’s Daily Treasure* contained notes written by Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg.

Sandburg wrote that a well-worn copy of this pocket-size book, inscribed with Lincoln’s own signature, had been dis-

covered in an old library. Sandburg surmised that the long-lost book might indeed have been the pocket Bible Lincoln reportedly read from during the Civil War. Sandburg said that inside its pages Lincoln “could come upon many sentences and phrases famous, important and often quoted; and many of the passages in the book could have had special interest to him.”

It was quite exciting to read the same devotions Lincoln may have used during his own personal prayer and meditation time. If Lincoln drew strength from it to overcome all sorts of obstacles, then I wanted some of that strength too! I found the devotions to be quite inspiring.

As I meditated with *The Believer's Daily Treasure*, I also began collecting my favorite Lincoln adages and combining them with reading from it. The combination of old-fashioned, Bible-based devotions and Lincoln's own spiritual words were, I thought, a real treasure. That's how this book was born.

I learned a lot about Lincoln as I edited this book, mostly about how much he relied on religious and spiritual principles to get by in life, to make important decisions, to comfort himself in sorrow, and to develop stronger character.

There is no doubt Abraham Lincoln wrote and said more about religion and spirituality than any other president in American history. From public podiums to private letters and conversations, Lincoln made it evident that he took the matter seriously. And while there is admittedly some conflicting evidence, I see no reason to believe Abraham Lincoln was anything but a Christian in the historical sense of the word.

In doing research for this book, I found that modern historians mostly avoid the topic. Maybe they don't want to admit what they know they'll find. While many books have been published about Lincoln, only a handful of them discuss his religious beliefs. There are books about his military prowess during the Civil War, his views on slavery, his oratorical skills, and

his political ambitions. Hundreds of books focus on his tragic assassination, while others focus on his childhood and life as a young frontiersman. There are books filled with quotes and quips and others with stories. Some books look at Lincoln from the perspective of those who knew him best, while others are written from the perspective of Lincoln himself. There are books to help you apply Lincoln's management style in your small business, books about his relationships with women, and even one that reveals the secrets of his DNA code. But there are almost no books in print about Lincoln's faith in God. The best I could find was part of a book written by Marvin Olasky, senior fellow of The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty. In his *The American Leadership Tradition*, Olasky looks at the Christian influences in Lincoln's life. But in compiling and editing this book, I had to look back more than half a century to find any complete books devoted to the subject.

Eventually I found what I was looking for. Early in the twentieth century, Lincoln's spiritual life was a subject of great public interest. In 1920 the prominent pastor and theologian William Barton wrote *The Soul of Lincoln*. Barton interviewed hundreds of those who knew Lincoln, and he collected thousands of letters, documents, and manuscripts about Lincoln's life. Barton's inquiry ultimately brought him to one conclusion: Abraham Lincoln believed and professed faith in the Christian God. He read the Bible, believed the New Testament message, and believed God both listened to and answered his prayers.

Soon afterward other books were written with similar conclusions. Dr. G. George Fox's *Abraham Lincoln's Religion* and William J. Wolf's *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* both showed the importance of Lincoln's faith in God and his belief in Christianity. In his book *Lincoln and the Preachers*, Edgar DeWitt Jones went as far as to illustrate Lincoln's association with specific nineteenth-

century churches and pastors. Jones recounts actual conversations Lincoln had with others about his Christian faith.

Many stories from Lincoln's life illustrate his religious convictions, but few stand out more than the story of September 22, 1862. It was on this day that Lincoln called a special meeting of his cabinet to announce the emancipation of slaves. Lincoln's announcement came as quite a surprise to the members of his cabinet. Years later several cabinet members penned their recollections of the meeting for the sake of posterity. Although there is some disagreement as to Lincoln's precise words, the diary of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells gives us the general idea of what Lincoln said. According to Wells, Lincoln told them "he had made a vow, a covenant, before God, that if He gave us victory over Lee in Pennsylvania, he would consider it his duty to move forward with the cause of emancipation." Wells said Lincoln expressed how much he was vexed over the decision, but he brought the matter before God, and "God had decided this question in favor of the slave."

I think that after you spend some time reflecting on the words in this book, you'll find every reason to believe Lincoln was a Christian according to the tenets of the historical Christian faith.

When Lincoln ran for Congress against the Reverend Peter Cartright, Lincoln was charged with being an "infidel" for not joining any particular Christian denomination. Cartright also suggested that Lincoln was a deist, or even worse, an atheist. Lincoln shrugged off the accusation, saying that he was never "a scoffer of Christianity" and that he "never denied the truth of the Scriptures." On the contrary, Lincoln embraced Judeo-Christian belief and the Bible.

There are no nuances to anything but orthodox Christianity in any of Lincoln's religious language. In fact, his idioms were often so biblical in nature he was once criticized for them. All his references to God, the Bible, and even Christ

were grounded in the historical Christian faith. He used terms like “Almighty” and “the Heavenly Father” when he spoke or wrote about deity. He used the name of Jesus in both private and public conversation, and he was the only president to name the Holy Spirit in a proclamation.

It’s true that Lincoln never applied for membership in any particular church or denomination, but that’s not to say he didn’t go to church. He was, in fact, a regular churchgoer. As a child he was raised in church, and after marrying Mary Todd he took a pew at the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, where he dutifully attended for more than ten years. As president he was often seen strolling down the streets of Washington, D.C., visiting various churches on Sunday morning.

Historian Edgar DeWitt Jones painstakingly documented Lincoln’s association with churches and pastors in his out-of-print book *Lincoln and the Preachers: How Lincoln Influenced the Life of Preachers and How the Preachers Influenced Lincoln*. Jones chronicled Lincoln’s association with dozens of preachers and ministers, visits to churches, and hundreds of private conversations he had with clergy. William H. Townsend, author of *Lincoln the Litigant*, hailed the book as “unique in the annals of Lincolniana.”

Not only did Lincoln attend church on a regular basis, he was also a student of the Bible. He put much of it to memory and referred to it specifically in public and private conversations. He alluded to stories from the Old Testament and to Jesus’ words and parables. Lincoln colleague John Hanks once said of him, “He kept the Bible and Aesop’s Fables always within reach and read them over and over again.” Once Lincoln told his friend and colleague L. L. Chittenden, register of the treasury, “I decided a long time ago that it was less difficult to believe that the Bible was what it claimed to be than to disbelieve it.”

Those who knew Lincoln best also remembered he was a man of prayer. He believed God heard his prayers, and he

sought God's will through prayer. "I talk to God," Lincoln once told General Daniel Sickles, "because my mind is relieved when I do." He added, "When I could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance in God, knowing that all would go well, and that He would decide for the right."

This book shows how Lincoln believed in the Providence and sovereign will of God and looked to life eternal. Furthermore, it shows that he was God's instrument to be used for his purposes.

I hope you enjoy the daily treasures inside this book and that they will help you find your way through troubled times and help you to achieve greatness.

This Too Shall Pass Away

My times are in thy hand. . . . Make thy face to shine upon thy servant: save me for thy mercies' sake.

Psalm 31:15–16

*"My times are in thy hand,"
My God, I wish them there;
My life, my friends, my soul, I leave
Entirely to thy care.*

When Lincoln was defeated by rival Stephen A. Douglas for a seat in Congress, Lincoln's friends and colleagues showed much remorse. Not Lincoln. He encouraged his supporters, telling them to carry on without regret. In a letter he wrote to one supporter, Judge N. B. Judd, Lincoln said, "You are feeling badly, but this too shall pass away . . . never fear." Lincoln consoled his friends with a biblical paraphrase, telling them to persevere because all bad things eventually pass. That's good advice. If you're in the middle of a trial, remember that it will pass. There's nothing so bad that it can't be solved by time, especially in God's time.

It's Not Outward Appearances That Count

In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.

1 John 4:9

*Pause, my soul, adore and wonder,
Ask, Oh, why such love to me?
Grace hath put me in the number
Of the Saviour's family:
Hallelujah!
Thanks, eternal thanks to thee.*

Abraham Lincoln never was good at first impressions. One man who was present at one of Lincoln's famous addresses said, "When Lincoln rose to speak, I was greatly disappointed. He was so . . . angular and awkward that I had, for an instant, a feeling of pity for so ungainly a man." But after listening to Lincoln speak, this man's opinion changed. "Pretty soon," he said, "he began to get into his subject . . . [and] the whole man was transfigured. I forgot about his personal appearances. Forgetting myself, I was soon on my feet with the rest, yelling like a wild Indian, cheering this wonderful man. He's the greatest man since St. Paul!" Do you sometimes dismiss another person's views because of how he or she looks? Be careful not to put too much weight on outward appearances. You might just look past someone who could help you, become your best friend, or even help set you free.

On Greed

Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.

1 John 5:4

*'Tis faith that conquers earth and hell
By a celestial power;
This is the grace that shall prevail
In the decisive hour.*

Mr. Roland Diller, who was one of Abraham Lincoln's neighbors in Springfield, Illinois, tells the following story: "I was called to the door one day by the cries of children in the street, and there was Mr. Lincoln, striding by with two of his boys, both of whom were wailing aloud. 'Why, Mr. Lincoln, what's the matter with the boys?' I asked. 'Just what's the matter with the whole world,' Lincoln replied. 'I've got three walnuts, and each wants two.'" Abraham Lincoln knew that most conflicts, however complex they might seem, really come down to one thing: greed. When we grow up, it's not walnuts we're concerned about. It's bigger houses, promotions, and new cars. But the principles are the same. When you focus on giving, not getting, you find yourself a much happier and more content person.

Keep Life Simple

He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much:
and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.

Luke 16:10

*Thy gifts are only then enjoy'd
When used as talents lent;
Those talents only well employ'd
When in his service spent.*

Lincoln's habits in the Oval Office were as simple as they were at his home in Illinois. He never alluded to himself as "president" or as occupying "the presidency." "Call me Lincoln," he said to a friend. He grew weary of being called "Mr. President." He would even venture out of the White House, strolling down the streets of Washington, D.C., unprotected. Friends cautioned him about being so open in the midst of enemies, but he never heeded them. He liked to keep his life simple, unencumbered by "pomp and circumstance." Even when he joined the ranks of the rich and famous, he refused to change his lifestyle simply to make an impression. Abe Lincoln was still Abe Lincoln. If you feel pressured by others to act like someone you're not, take a stroll and remember that what is important is that you're happy with yourself.

Don't Settle for Mediocrity

If God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

Matthew 6:30

*I know not what may soon betide,
Or how my wants shall be supplied;
But Jesus knows, and will provide.*

*When creature comforts fade and die,
Worldlings may weep — but why should I?
Jesus still lives, and still is nigh.*

As commander in chief, Lincoln expected the best in his generals. He would not countenance failure on the part of subordinates but doled out the severest punishment on those who did not win victories. After his defeat at Fredericksburg, Burnside was relieved by Hooker, who suffered defeat at Chancellorsville; Hooker was relieved by Meade, who won at Gettysburg but was refused promotion because he did not crush Lee. Then Rosecrans was all but defeated at Chickamauga and gave way to Grant, who of all the Union commanders never lost a battle. Grant was Lincoln's ideal leader, and he was never superseded. If you're looking for help, do you settle for less than average? Sometimes to win a war, you have to find the best and expect the best from those who are helping you.