

# SUCCESS THROUGH DEFEAT.

## MORAL LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

It is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.—*John XI, 50.*

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Monday last was Abraham Lincoln's birthday. You may be surprised to recall how long ago was the year of his birth—1809—a date which carries us almost to the borders of the last century.

Even the War now seems 'ancient history'—so faint have become the lessening echoes of its conflicts and so lost to typographical trace the nicer outlines of many a noted battlefield.

But the American people should never lose the historic sense. Looking backward is a duty, as looking forward is a privilege.

A nation for whom Almighty God has done as much as he has for our people cannot afford to forget its past. Where in American history Jehovah has trod his awful way and providence blazed its fiery track through the heart and life of the nation no true patriot will fail to look with awe, or neglect to tell his children of the former days of peril and the wondrous works of God.

\* Condensed.

Abraham Lincoln has gone beyond the estimates of earth, where panegyrics cannot elate nor criticisms harm him. His fame is secure. We can really neither add to nor detract from it.

With regard, however, to the fierce struggle of the Civil War and Mr. Lincoln's relation to it, we would do well to bear in mind two facts: first, the man, with all his intellectual power and personal magnetism, did not make the great opportunity which then offered for the creation of sublime history, nor on the other hand did the occasion for heroic action, so imperative in its call, so broad in its sphere, make him what he was—but God made both opportunity and man.

*The man did not make the opportunity.* Opportunity as a rule can only be manufactured on a small scale. Narrow doors of entrance may here or there be opened without difficulty, but the broad arena is more rarely found. Many forces march and countermarch through human history, but not every position assumed is strategic—not every spot offers for a 'decisive battle' of the world. Moreover, that which in the career of many a heroic soul is applauded as a noted instance of genius displayed in the inauguration of a great movement is but the manifestation of an ability to utilize and administer that which has been preparing for centuries. The hero has found his opportunity, not made it. He has genius, but it is the talent of the discoverer, the prophet or the executive. Historic forces operative long before his birth have been providentially preparing for the coming man, and when at last he arrives on history's field he finds and improves his God-sent chance. Charlemagne did not make consolidated Europe; Luther did not make the Reformation; Washington did not make free America; Bismarck did not make united Germany.

What these men found, they utilized; where others left off, they began; when the tide ceased to run ebb they swept in on the new flood. Their genius and glory was to use opportunity. The heroic Lincoln was no exception to this rule. He utilized opportunity. A vast deal of American history intensively was made during his presidential career, but the historic processes had started in long before 'the Rail-splitter's' birth. When a constitution was adopted by the young nation which permitted slave-holding there entered into the fabric of statehood the first cleavage of the wedge which would eventually by its decisive push widen things out into the broad bisection of 1861. For years the Abolitionists had been anathematizing slavery. Mrs. Stowe wrote a book which was a revelation to the North, and proved the slave's evangel. Opportunity had been preparing for half a hundred years. And when in 1860 Lincoln, the rough backwoodsman, was elected President by the party opposed to the extension of slavery the time was ripe for great political happenings—the hour of twelve had struck on history's clock—and with the flight of the first shell across the waters of Charleston harbor in menace to the old flag flying on Sumter's dingy battlements Abraham Lincoln found his chance.

That he was not equal to his opportunity few will venture to assert. That he went as fast and as far as the abolitionist zealots would have had him will not be contended. As prophet, Lincoln himself had on the stump denounced slavery; as Chief Executive he awaited the momentous occasion (as he thought) for its official anathema.

Historic realizations do not ripen in an hour. You cannot hasten history. God does not. Growth is a slow process. The time when a nation is born in a day is not

yet, while still the increase of a people's might comes where in many scattered homes cradled innocence is all slowly, quietly nurtured into final strength by the patience of the mothering love which *waits* the promise of the coming years.

*The opportunity did not make the man.* Opportunity is not creative, it is simply permissive, or at the most inspirational. It means freedom to act, a 'Hands off!' to circumstance, a grouping of forces and results so that action will tell.

But opportunity never yet made a man do well who did not have the action in him. It may summon forth to manifestation the true manhood that is in the individual, but if so it is but the development of the latent, previously cultivated energies of the soul. Opportunity is a precious gift of God given to those who are prepared.

President Lincoln, now, was a prepared man. In 1861 the opportunity called for the man and the man was ready. (God always has a man ready when things are ready for God.) God's man that time was Abraham Lincoln. He had been at work upon that man for years. By the sharp tutelage of poverty and need; by the disciplines of frontier debating-clubs and County court-rooms; by the frictions of a wild life and the cultures of rough, though hardy and intelligent, border society, and later by the contests of the stump and of the legislative hall, Providence had been developing a man whose rugged honesty shone conspicuously through the multiform conflicts of the struggling years, whose wits were sharpened by a hundred forensic contests with his fellows, and whose iron will had by the oppositions of a harsh world been strengthened into a power of purpose and of achievement which rose equal to the final testings of those awful years of Civil War. That was God putting

Abraham Lincoln to school, to providence and to humanity; and God always educates his chosen prophets or elected rulers, though it be not alway in the academes of a cultured Athens or the forums of a proud, imperial Rome.

So the man was ready when the opportunity was on. Not opportunity, but God, had made this manhood; and looking upon his creative handiwork of character with relation to the needs and urgencies of that great crisis of American history, for those purposes of preservation and deliverance 'God saw that it was good.'

There is now one phase of the providential preparation of President Lincoln for his life-work and his martyr's death which has led me to include in the title of this sermon the significant words 'Success through defeat.' That President Lincoln was successful all people say, but to what extent his successes were associated with defeat, or even eventuated out of defeat, few people realize. He won after having often failed—indeed we might almost say, he failed that he might win. Not only were the crucial years of his Presidential career crowded with cares, burdened with crushing responsibilities and replete with sorrows which came of many disappointments, and were the resultants of a host of pitiless criticisms and persistent oppositions, but the previous years of his life formed a very significant record of most discouraging defeats along many lines of ambition and effort. 'Cast down' Lincoln often was, and yet 'not destroyed'; persecuted by enemies yet not despairing; deserted by friends, and yet hopeful; baffled, yet persistent, and successful finally—through defeat.

The magnificently triumphant Lincoln men called him, and visioned a constant halo of glory about his head. Ah, they little thought of the sadness that mocked that triumph, nor reflected what it cost him to win! His was

a splendid historic figure; there seemed to be in his life the strength of the eternal hills. Yet if he was strong it was in spite of weakness; if he was controlled, it was not because he did not suffer; if he laughed it was not because he would not often have the rather wept. And so we must regard him, not as a great, cold historic figure lifted high on a pedestal of fame far off the plane of human sympathies and foibles, but simply a majestic man of the people, while above them; who could say *nihil humani alienum*; and whose noble spirit felt with an intense keenness while it seemed to act with such an impassive coolness—the language of comedy often upon his lips, but the hurt of a nation's woe alway paining at his heart, and the infinite pathos of a cruel war ever tinging his life with unspeakable sadness.

Some think of Abraham Lincoln with all his success as essentially a sad and weary man. He felt the losses of the War most keenly. He seemed to hear every groan on all the battle-fields and each and every sob from desolate Northern homesteads. He was a sad man—how could he help being that, and at such a time be President? His sadness grew upon him—it was an increasing anxiety, a cumulative grief. The burden became heavier with the passing months and years of the War; and even when victory at last had come, and the President, attended by a small escort, could for himself enter the now smouldering but once impregnable Richmond, his features hinted not at all of triumph, but wore an aspect of unspeakable weariness, of pathetic sadness, as though all the bitter memories of what had been pressed upon him with accumulated force, while as yet the inspirations of the coming age of freedom and firmer union called not to his soul. It was Lincoln dying for a nation, dying in spirit, weakening in nervous force, while

perhaps some premonitions of the tragic end not many weeks delayed declared to his sad consciousness: 'The calls of the coming age are not for you, though through your death in life while you lived your fame and influence will live on forever though you die!'

And so I have deemed it no irreverence, nor an inappropriate thing to preface this discourse with those words of Caiaphas, which, while uttered in obedience to a prophetic impulse originating 'not of himself,' and applied originally to the great Sufferer who is the antitype of all the holy martyrs that have ever lived and died, was yet quite probably in its form the substance of a proverbial dictum current among the contemporaries of the High Priest, who in this speech only perhaps made application of an accepted maxim to a special and Divine martyrdom. And oftentimes it may in a most holy sense be 'expedient' that of his own free volition 'one man should die' for a people, rather than that a whole nation perish in its stupidity of error or poverty of life.

'A life for a life' is a hard law—a life for many lives may be a blessed sacrifice, because a free gift. Abraham Lincoln was a man who perished in the service of 'a whole nation.' There was an element of vicariousness in his life as there is in all lives that in the highest sense bless the world. Lincoln died for others. His service, his devotion, his sympathy, his steadfastness killed him. In two senses this great man died that a whole nation perish not. He perished by the merciless oppressions of the care-filled months and the bitter grievings of the weary years, before he died by the hand of the traitorous assassin.

We think of death as instantaneous. Not necessarily—death may be by inches. A man may 'die daily,' be worn by the calls of the passing hours, consumed by the

griefs of the successive years, and weakened by the disappointments of a cheerless life—die in hope, die in enthusiasm, die to joy, and at length, seemingly, to pain itself.

Such a continuous martyrdom was that of President Lincoln. While he lived his great heart carried upon it the burdens and sorrows of a whole nation, well-nigh breaking under the load; and when he died, laid low by the bullet of the assassin, it was but the physical consummation of a spiritual sacrifice long since complete. Alike in life and death he was the ‘martyred President.’

Note now a few simple lessons from the life of Lincoln.

The lesson of high moral purpose. President Lincoln, we believe, had a sincere desire to work along the line of God’s plans. As an architect of history he was a conscientious workman. His aims were high. Lincoln was one of those men to whom it makes a difference whether a thing is right or wrong; and once convinced of the right of a cause he was immovable as a rock in its defence.

The lesson of sturdy courage. It takes courage to be President of the United States at any time—it required especial courage to be President in the dark days of the War. In that sharp crisis of the nation’s history not all the valor was that of the battle-field or the ocean flood. In hall of Congress and in official residence of the Chief Magistrate courage of a high and steady type was a requisite.

The lesson of humanness and benignity. There was much certainly of a very human quality and sympathy in President Lincoln. He had never been a man of courts and assemblies; he had risen from the ranks of the common people, whom always he loved; and retained all of



his rugged simplicity of taste until the last. He never ceased to be a man though a President. There was a way to his heart, even through White House doors.

The lesson of kindly geniality. Abraham Lincoln knew how to laugh, and how to make others laugh. There was in him a vein of deep, genuine humor, which served not merely to relieve the tenseness of his own feelings at one or another critical juncture of the War, but also had the happy effect of putting him in touch with every day people about him.

I for one do not hesitate to say that there may be moral worth in a hearty laugh and religion in a smile, so be it that God is not contemned in either the grave or gay of life. The *geniality* of a true Christian life commends it greatly to the world, while a sour, morose disposition makes no man want to be a Christian. *Be genial for Christ.*

The lesson of patriotic endeavor. If Abraham Lincoln was not a patriot he was nothing. He believed in American institutions, and in the future destinies of this great western nation. For the preservation of the Union he gave his clearest thought, his deepest enthusiasm, his most active exertion—in a word, he gave himself. No cause seemed so adequate, so important as this, for to him the destruction of the Union would have made all other causes impossible. And so no one term so much expressed his life and spirit perhaps as the word ‘loyalty’—a loyalty to the best American tradition which, so freely according himself, he exacted uncompromisingly from others.

That is a fine lesson his life is teaching us to-day. We can be patriotic. Though we have not Lincoln’s chance we can have his spirit. We have entered into the heritage of the valor and virtue of preceding generations.

Patriotism is always necessary. The war is over; but the peace that now is hath its victories too—its opportunities, its potencies, yes, and its perils, insecurities, traps, and ambuscades of hazard. Everything of worth in this world is assailed, is risked every hour. Deadlier foes threaten our public life than ever massed on the other side of the James—invisible adversaries of selfishness, greed, and immorality. The antagonists most to be dreaded are not those which our gallant Army and Navy, backed if need be by the whole power of the nation, could oppose, but that form of sneaking enmity which takes shape in unmitigated self-aggrandizement, which lurks in the drunkard's cup, conceals itself in the bribe accepted by juror or voter, or creeps stealthily in the tracks of the plotting anarchist.

Yes, the peril of knavery and corruption is ever greater than the menace of the sword. Unrighteousness is always destructive, evil is essentially anarchical. Vice saps, immorality undermines, self-seeking ruins the fair social fabric.

The true patriot, realizing this, arms himself to combat these moral perils. He draws sabre in behalf of truth and righteousness. The swords that once on Southern soil pointed out to advancing columns the path to death and glory now hang rusting on the walls of Northern homes, and the flags which once, fluttering across gory battle-fields or mounting sharp traverses, were torn of shot and shell or rent by the thorns of thick abattis rest now in senate halls, preserved most tenderly under glass, that upon them not even the unkindly dust may light.

But the sword flashes still in the hand of the alert, the intelligent, the brave, wielded by patriotic devotion in halls of Congress, on public platform, in pulpit, or in

newspaper office; and the colors are shaken out to the breeze and the risks of combat yet, on many a sharply contested field—albeit the steel be that of sharp conviction, the cutting-edge that of logic, the thrust that of the rhetorical period, and the banners the invisible guidons of principle and sublime ideas and earnest desire.

It is warfare still. The contest in behalf of American institutions, threatened by invasion of unfriendly foreign ideas, and in behalf of all that is true, honest, pure and of good report in life, is ever on and ever severe. The call is for more than 75,000 men to serve a three months enlistment.

Yes, every man has his chance, and his task. What the nation had in '61 was opportunity. What every individual member of it now has resolves itself at the last analysis into just this—opportunity. Life is short—but it is always long enough to give every soul a *chance* to make something of self, to be something for others.

And let us bear in mind that the true, sure sanctions of loyalty to fatherland are religious. We are a religious people, take us all in all—we have been, we mean to be. That Providence has been interested hitherto in the conservation and will be concerned in future for the development of American institutions we are sure. With Washington and Lincoln we share the impression that a Divine hand has been occupied with the shaping of our history thus far. In great crises of our civil struggle we have felt a divine touch upon our history—the chief direction of events has been from above.

Who selected Cemetery Ridge as the rallying point for a successful stand at Gettysburg? Was it Reynolds, Howard or Hancock? No, it was God!

A divinely directed past, then, calls upon us to be nobly patriotic. High ideals are influential yet. Cour-

age is still current, heroism is not yet obsolete. The time has not yet come to perform the last sad burial rites over the remains of virtue, nor to carve the mournful epitaph on the sepulchre of truth. The cause of justice, liberty and light is not yet, thank God! a 'lost cause.' The spirit of the Sixties dominates now in the Nineties, and shall sway the Twentieth century which is to come. The past has set a standard which the future dare not fall below; for it would be despicable now for any American to be unheroic, with Stony Point and Valley Forge, the Peninsula and the Wilderness behind him.

It is "all quiet along the Potomac" where once the vigilant pickets watched and the crackle of musketry was often heard. We are the 'United' States now, in a truer, completer sense than ever before in our history. The echoes of the ancient controversies are dying away and the old wounds gradually healing. Peace secures us its own peculiar opportunities. The marchings and counter-marchings of civic activity now engage our people. Great problems demand patient thought and effort, that true 'government of the people, by the people, for the people' (that governance which was Lincoln's care and love) do not 'perish from the earth.'

God's historic calls are upon us. Let us round out our little day of existence with loyal service and faithful effort—and then, when the shadows gather about us at the sunset hour of our earthly career, if we have really taxed and tired ourselves with honest toil and valorous doing, it will come to us naturally, and wistfully with the pathos of a deeper figurative meaning, to recall the half-delirious fancy of the dying Jackson at the close of that hard-fought day at Chancellorsville and to re-echo his plaintive words: "Let us cross over the River, and rest under the shade of the trees!"

For beyond the bourn and boundary of this life, somewhere off on fair celestial plains where broods an eternal and unruffled calm, there is situate a quiet mustering ground for all such as shall have proved themselves brave foemen, unconquered of evil, loyal followers of the Christ of God, faithful servitors of His on earth—even as that verse of the old farewell chorus sung by graduating West Pointers on the eve of parting one from another has it:

“Some may sleep 'neath the prairie sod,  
And some go home by the sea, my boys:  
But hearts that are true to their country and their God  
Shall meet at the Great Reveille, my boys!”





