

*N. S. Draper*

# LINCOLN

AMERICA'S GREAT COMMONER

## A SERMON

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BY

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# LINCOLN

## AMERICA'S GREAT COMMONER

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There was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he ;  
from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people.

I SAMUEL, 9-2.

Full grown men are scarce. Pygmies are everywhere. Men who stand from their shoulders up higher than the rest, attract attention in any crowd. For the most part great men, like stars of the first magnitude, stand apart in a fellowless firmament. And then again they group themselves together in a constellation which sets all the sky aflame with splendor. The year 1809 was a constellation year of new lights; not in the heavens, but on the earth. For the most wondrous work of an Almighty hand is not to make stars, but to make men; men of noble impulse; men who shall match his mountains and his plains; men who shall live and shine when sun and moon and stars have faded out. It was that year which gave England and America their poet laureates, Tennyson and Holmes; which gave to all the earth the laureates of harmony, Chopin and Mendelssohn; to science her Darwin, and to England her Great Commoner, Gladstone. As though this were not enough, it gave to the New World an infant voice whose song should thrill more hearts than any other since that which the angels sang over Bethlehem's plains:

My country 'tis of thee,  
Sweet land of liberty,  
Of thee I sing.

For Samuel F. Smith, the author of "America," was born in this same eventful year. But tallest, noblest, best, the chiefest

among giants, was he of the Kentucky home, who from his shoulders upward towered high above the rest; God's greatest gift to the greatest Republic of the earth, Abraham Lincoln, America's Great Commoner.

We would not have thought to find such treasure in such a by-way spot. But Lincoln was born, not in a forlorn cabin in the wilderness, but in the richly furnished heart of Nancy Hanks, his mother. That mother, rich in heart, though poor in all things else, looked into the face of her newborn child, and gave him his name and the queenly qualities of her noble spirit as her only legacy. She taught him to pray and love the Bible, and then went home to God in the morning of her young womanhood, having done more for the race and for her country than any other mother since the glad day when bells and bonfires announced the birth of the Republic. It was years before the world knew of that Kentucky home; of the coming of the lad or the going of the mother; but God knew. Down the broadening highway of the future he saw the stress and strain of a half century to come; he heard the cry of the oppressed, as three thousand years before he had heard the cry of Israel's sons and the lash of the oppressor. As then he watched over Moses, a slave child in the rushes, who should lead a race from the land of bondage to the Land of Promise; so in our day he watched over the Moses of our Israel, that in the fulness of time he might have a leader with faith to follow the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night; until at last, with the Promised Land in sight, God should take him up from the mountain top of triumph to his coronation.

God, doubtless, might make full grown men in a minute; but he never does. Moses did not attain full stature until he was four score. A half century is none too long to send a lad to school, if you have great tasks for him to do at the end of the fifty years. God, therefore, sent this unknown Kentucky lad to school. There was no other master, so he became his teacher. There was no other schoolhouse, so he took him into his schoolhouse—his great out-of-doors. There was no other text book, so he gave him his text book of the ages, the Bible; with Aesop's

Fables, Fox's Martyrs and Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, as books of reference, for variety. He did not hurry him; there was time enough. To modern school boards the methods and the books might have seemed quite out of date. But we will not condemn them until we examine our scholar. That same old schoolhouse of God's out-of-doors has many an alumnus for whom the world needs to make no apology.

God needed a man with four supreme gifts, heart and honor, good sense and faith. It is so rare to find these four supreme gifts combined in any one man that God could well afford to keep this country lad in school for a half century, if need be, before giving him his final test; if, as a result, he might attain first honor in each one.

Scholars are good. The United States and the present century have the most improved methods of producing them. We spend millions of dollars a year to avail ourselves of the latest improvements to the machinery. We employ hundreds of thousands of skilled mechanics to operate the machines. We start the raw material in at five years of age; the machine begins its work and never stops. At twenty the raw material has been worked up into scholars, ready for delivery to the markets of the world; mathematicians, philosophers, scientists; whatever you may happen to want. You may have first quality or second, according to what you can pay. Splendid machine; splendid output; skilled operatives. But scholarship alone cannot produce the qualities which God most needed for his Great Commoner. For heart and honor, good sense and faith count for more than what we call scholarship.

God's out-of-doors is a good place to grow hearts. Open fields are far better for heart expansion than crowded streets. The open is a good place, too, to grow good sense. For there one has time to think, a privilege often denied in other school rooms. The Bible is a great text book, too. It was about the only one young Lincoln had. Many school boards rule it out. But God thought it would do for Lincoln. You know the story of those fifty years at school. I have nothing new to tell. Did the lad "make good?" Was it worth while for God to take a

half century to train a six feet four awkward country lad, the rail splitter of the Sangamon bottom ?

Suppose we examine him on the four subjects which God was most anxious for him to know. We will pass by chemistry and trigonometry and biology ; for I am afraid that Lincoln might not pass in these ; and I am very sure that many other students would have higher standing. The truth is, that our Great Commoner had been so busy at his other tasks that he had not had much chance to excel in subjects outside of his regular course.

We will first examine Lincoln's heart. For it is here that so-called great men sometimes fail. The man who is too great to shed tears is not great at all. When as a young man he went down the Mississippi to New Orleans and saw the slave pen and auction block for the first time, it was his tenderness of heart which caused him to say, "If ever I get a chance to hit that thing, I will hit it hard, by the Eternal God." Bishop Simpson loved Lincoln, and often felt his heart-throb. When about to leave one Thursday evening the President said, "Stay with me, Bishop." "But I must not stay longer," said Bishop Simpson, "you need sleep." "To-morrow," said Lincoln, "is the day of execution in the army ; when the boys who have fallen asleep at their posts are shot. The officers tell me that I pardon so many that it tends to destroy the discipline of the army, and that I must be more firm ; but I never sleep on Thursday night. Stay with me, Bishop." Did Lincoln have a heart ? Ask the soldiers at the front. Then, for answer, listen to the martial song that swells up from the hearts beating loyally and lovingly under the blue uniforms :

"We are coming, Father Abraham,  
Three hundred thousand strong."

Men do not coin such titles except for those they love. Every soldier boy who sung the song knew that there was a father's heart at the White House that was answering back love for love. Did Lincoln have a heart ? The Irish porter at the White House knew. When a soldier's wife came to plead for the par-

don of her husband for some capital offense he had committed; she was about to leave her baby in the hall when she went in to see the President. But the Irish porter said, "Be sure and take the baby up with ye." When, a little later, the mother came down stairs, smiling and happy, the pardon granted, Patrick said, "Ah, Ma'am, it was the baby that did it." Since Jesus walked this earth there has never been a man with tenderer heart than our Great Commoner. He loved the South; although the South, blinded by passion, saw it not. They called him "devil;" but he called them the "Sons of the Republic," and plead with them to "come back home and behave themselves." He wanted no war; he wished no man, North or South, to shed his blood. He proposed the purchase of the slaves to Alexander Stephens at Fortress Monroe. But Stephens would consider nothing but the recognition of the Confederacy. "In that case, Stephens," said Lincoln, "I am guiltless of every drop of blood that may be shed from this time onward." The next day he presented the matter to the Cabinet, but only Seward was with him. The amount, \$400,000,000.00, which we could not afford, to buy the slaves, we paid over and over and over again, to free them; and besides, a wealth of life blood, North and South, which was worth more to the Republic than all its gold. Lincoln loved the South as he loved the North, and when he died one of the best friends the South ever had went up to God. A daughter of Jefferson Davis is now the wife of a banker in Colorado Springs, Colorado. She has recently told how as a little girl, on the morning after Lincoln was shot, she heard the guards outside rejoicing over the fact. She ran in to tell her father of Lincoln's death, thinking that he would be glad to hear the startling news. His face grew sad in a moment, as he took her upon his knee, he said, "My daughter, you do not understand. This is the hardest blow which could have befallen the South. Mr. Lincoln was the best friend the South ever had in all the North." From childhood I have been in the habit of calling the President of the Confederacy "Jeff" Davis. But when, through these words to his daughter, I first saw into his heart, I registered a vow that hereafter I would always speak of him as

“Mr.” Davis, or as “Jefferson” Davis. For a man with such a spirit is worthy to be honored by his proper name.

The closing paragraph of Lincoln's second Inaugural might have been written by St. John; beginning as you recall, “With malice toward none, and with charity for all.” Again and again he declared, “I have not suffered for the South; I have suffered with the South.” Hear him as he says, “I have never knowingly planted a thorn in any human heart. But I have always endeavored to pluck a thorn and plant a rose, wherever a rose would grow.” God and the nation know how well he did his work. I do not wonder that President Roosevelt calls Lincoln “the Great Heart of American public life.” Did Lincoln pass in great-heartedness? Out of the past I hear the voice of Him who spake as never man spake, saying, “Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you.” From the day that Jesus spoke upon the Mount, until the day on which Lincoln went up to his coronation, there never lived a man who came nearer to the standard which Christ himself set up than did our Great Commoner.

Examine Lincoln next as to his honesty. Many a man, great in other ways, has failed to pass in this subject. Many a man, too, who once was honest, finds that his fingers take on cunning and skill in getting into other people's pockets when he gets into public life. He finds also that as he goes up in the social and political scale, his standards of honesty go down. Lincoln began honest. He would walk a half dozen miles after a hard day's work to correct an error of twenty-five cents in making change with a poor woman. He was honest with himself and with his conscience as well as with other people's purses. In the famous Lincoln-Douglas campaign in '58, the committee told Lincoln that it would not do to say, as he proposed, that “This country cannot longer exist half slave and half free;” that to advocate such a view would be to lose the election. Those who were there said that Lincoln seemed to grow several inches taller in a minute, as he looked the politicians squarely in the eyes and said, “Gentlemen, it is not necessary for



me to win the coming election; but it is necessary for me to stand by my convictions." And, as the practical politicians prophesied, Douglas won the election. Two years later, however, came the ever memorable convention of 1860 in Chicago; in which more interest centered than in any other nominating convention since the birth of the Republic. Great states, represented by strong delegations, were present to present the names of their favorite sons for the high office of President of the United States. Most conspicuous of all was the great delegation from the great Empire State, which went to Chicago, confident that the honored name of New York's great son, William H. Seward, would receive the support of the convention for the Presidency. Repeated roll calls, however, showed the increasing strength of a comparatively unknown Westerner, Lincoln, by name. At last, after a night of conference and council, on the third roll call, in the midst of a whirlwind of excitement, New York State was reached. Her great Governor, chairman of the delegation, rose and waited for recognition. In the stillness of expectancy which followed he said, "New York came to this convention to place in nomination a great statesman, William H. Seward; she now withdraws the name of her candidate, and changes her vote to Abraham Lincoln." Everyone knew in an instant, as if by electric shock, that this meant the nomination of Lincoln. Pandemonium was let loose. Someone leaped into a chair, and waving a newspaper to attract attention, shouted "Three cheers for honest old Abe." The voting ceased for a season; but the shouting went on and on and on, until the wigwam shook as though in the grip of a cyclone. The sound of voices was like that of heaven's artillery. Lincoln was the choice of the people because they believed him to be honest; and because only an honest man could be trusted at such an hour. Lean, gaunt, untutored, uncultured,—yes; he was guilty of it all. But in the school where God is master, which Lincoln had attended for some time, he had learned honesty. Having passed 100 per cent. in that, the people forgave him the rest. For the Republic in 1860 needed honesty in its Chief Executive more than it needed culture and good looks.

Shall we proceed with the examination? We have found Lincoln high above the passing mark in great-heartedness and in honesty. How about his good sense,—common sense. That something which a college cannot produce; that which cannot be made to order, or bought at any price. That indispensable ingredient which needs to be mixed with other excellencies in order to give them supreme value. This was Lincoln's strongest point. If he is 100 per cent. in other subjects he is 100 per cent. plus, in this. Fortunate for him that he had been tutored in the great schoolhouse of God's out-of-doors; far away from the hurry and press of city life. For somehow common sense, of which there is never any too much, is found more often along the country highway than in the city street. You find it clad more often in homespun than in broadcloth. It was Lincoln's great good sense which stood him in hand on thousands of occasions better than any other asset which he had, except his faith.

There were a lot of people around Washington who knew more than did Lincoln about running the government; so they thought; so a great many of their friends thought. He had only had one term in Congress. His nomination and election to the presidency was regarded by many as an accident. Men who made a business of politics and government had never counted Lincoln as in their class. In the interests of peace and with a desire to stimulate loyalty and confidence, he had given the men who were most prominent at Chicago as rival candidates for the Presidency a place in his Cabinet. A courtesy which all did not appreciate. Seward, Chase, Fessenden, Trumbull, Simon Cameron, Zachariah Chandler; each considered himself superior to his chief. Little by little Lincoln's great good sense, and their ability to recognize it, lifted him high above the Cabinet, great men that they were; until the House, the Senate, the Republic and the world looked on in wonder at the greatness of this man who for a half century had been thinking, thinking, thinking; until the fruitage was such a harvest of good sense as the world had not seen before.

What of Lincoln's faith? Some have said that he did not pass.

But such do not know. Recall a single sentence of his farewell words to his Springfield neighbors as he was leaving for Washington: "I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested on Washington. Without the assistance of that divine Being who ever attended him I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail." A motto still hangs on the wall in the old Springfield home, just as it hung forty-nine years ago when the committee came to notify Lincoln of his nomination. It reads: "Those who trust God need never be discouraged." After the formal notification, Lincoln, pointing to the motto, said, "We trust in God, and we will not be discouraged." On the table nearby lays Lincoln's Bible, as it lay that day. The leaves are worn with constant use. Pick it up and it will open to the Psalms; for it was to the Psalms that Lincoln turned most frequently. The bits of ribbon and strips of paper which he used as book-marks still remain where he left them; and many verses marked with pencil, indicate the portions which were to him the greatest comfort and inspiration. Was our Great Commoner a man of faith? For answer, hear him in the campaign of 1860, when, with the voice and vision of one of God's old-time prophets, he declares "I know there is a God, and that He hates injustice and slavery. I see the storm coming and know His hand is in it. If He has a place and work for me, and I think He has, I believe I am ready. I am nothing, but truth is everything. I know that I am right, because I know that liberty is right, for Christ teaches it, and Christ is God."

Lincoln believed in a God who heard prayer. Often when Bishop Simpson called upon the President he would request him to offer prayer before leaving. One day he said: "I have often been driven to my knees when, under the pressure of overwhelming difficulty, I felt that my own wisdom and that of others around me had utterly failed, and I had nowhere else to go." It was to General Rusling that the President told of the prayer he offered before the battle of Gettysburg, in which he promised God that if he would give victory to the Union army he would free the slaves.

Did he have faith? Aye; it was a faith which reached up through the blackness of the battle smoke until it touched the hand of the great Master who had been his teacher for fifty and five years; and touching it, he held it fast. It mattered not that the earth trembled under the tread of armies. He knew the pressure of that hand would fail him not; and knowing, he marched unseen beside the rank and file of the boys in blue through the bloody death damp of every battlefield all the way from Sumter to Appomattox; ever trusting the great Commander-in-Chief to guide both him and them.

Lincoln's long school term of fifty and six years is at last finished. The examinations are over. The scholars have all gone home. Not one of the generation born in 1809 is left. Did Lincoln pass? Let the world make answer; let the coming centuries speak. With one voice they tell me that in gentleness of heart, in rugged honesty, in good sense and in sterling faith he was never found wanting. I am glad to hear the Master say "Well done" to my six feet four, Kentucky lad; the awkward homely youth who would have had little chance had not God offered him free tuition in his school. As I gaze upon his features, the ugliness which I first saw gives way to lines of beauty as the soul shines through.

It is true that the scholars of a century ago have all gone; but the schoolhouse of God's out-of-doors still remains; the same Master stands at the open door; the same wide open Text Book welcomes the seeker after truth. The Master still offers free tuition and immortal prizes to every son and daughter of the Republic who, like Lincoln, will be faithful unto death.

It is fitting that we remember February 12th; let no child forget the birthday of America's Great Commoner. It is fitting, too, that we forget April 15th, the day of shadows. Who cares to make a pilgrimage to the plain three-story brick house at 516 Tenth St., N. W., Washington, where Lincoln breathed his last. But the Nation will this week lay the corner-stone of a shrine which will long endure upon the spot where Lincoln

was born. 'Tis life not death which makes us think of Lincoln. Lincoln has lived one hundred years, come Friday next. The four qualities of his life which we have viewed this morning are the corner-stones of immortality for any soul. We crown to-day the first century of Lincoln's life; to be followed by other swift flying centuries as long as time shall last. The laurel wreath upon his triumphant brow will never fade. Stanton knew not how well he spake that night by Lincoln's bedside; when, as the weary heart stopped beating, he laid the pulseless hand of the Great Commoner across his quiet breast and said, "He is with the ages." Lincoln is not dead. Centuries and calendars have little to do with such a life.

Has any creature thought of Lincoln hid  
In any vault, 'neath any coffin lid,  
In all the years since that wild spring of pain?  
'Tis false, he never in the grave hath lain.  
You could not bury him although you slid  
Upon his clay the Cheops pyramid  
Or heaped it with the Rocky Mountain chain.

They slew themselves; they but set Lincoln free.  
In all the earth his great heart beats as strong;  
Shall beat while pulses throb to chivalry  
And burn with hate of tyranny and wrong.  
Whoever will may find him, anywhere  
Save in the tomb. Not there—he is not there.

Our Great Commoner is with the ages and with God.

