

**THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ABRAHAM
LINCOLN: A SERMON PREACHED
AT THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY
TRINITY, PHILADELPHIA, SUNDAY
MORNING, APRIL 23, 1865**

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The life and death of Abraham Lincoln: a sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia, Sunday morning, April 23, 1865 by Phillips Brooks

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PHILLIPS BROOKS

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THE
LIFE AND DEATH OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY

PHILADELPHIA,

Sunday Morning, April 23, 1865,

BY THE

Rev. PHILLIPS BROOKS.

PRINTED AT THE REQUEST OF MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION.

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"HE CHOSE DAVID ALSO HIS SERVANT AND TOOK HIM AWAY FROM THE SHEEPFOLDS; THAT HE MIGHT FEED JACOB HIS PEOPLE AND ISRAEL HIS INHERITANCE. SO HE FED THEM WITH A FAITHFUL AND TRUE HEART, AND RULED THEM PRUDENTLY WITH ALL HIS POWER."—*Psalms* lxxviii. 71, 72, 73.

HERE is a description of a great and good ruler—of the source from which God took him, of the purpose of his taking, and of the character which belonged to the rulership which he exercised.

While I speak to you to-day, the body of the President who ruled this people is lying honored and loved, in our City. It is impossible with that sacred presence in our midst for me to stand and speak of the ordinary topics which occupy the pulpit. I must speak of him to-day; and I therefore undertake to do what I had intended to do at some future time, to invite you to study with me the character of Abraham Lincoln, the impulses of his life, and the causes of his death. I know how hard it is to do it rightly, how impossible it is to do it worthily. But I shall speak with confidence because I speak to those who love him, and whose ready love will fill out the deficiencies in a picture which my words will weakly try to draw. I can only promise you to speak calmly,

conscientiously, affectionately, and with what understanding of him I can command.

We take it for granted first of all, that there is an essential connection between Mr. Lincoln's character and his violent and bloody death. It is no accident, no arbitrary decree of Providence. He lived as he did, and he died as he did, because he was what he was. The more we see of events the less we come to believe in any fate or destiny except the destiny of character. It will be our duty, then, to see what there was in the character of our great President that created the history of his life and at last produced the catastrophe of his cruel death. After the first trembling horror, the first outburst of indignant sorrow has grown calm, these are the questions which we are bound to ask and answer.

It is not necessary for me even to sketch the biography of Mr. Lincoln. He was born in Kentucky, fifty-six years ago, when Kentucky was a pioneer State. He lived, as boy and man, the hard and needy life of a backwoodsman, a farmer, a river boatman, and finally, by his own efforts at self-education, of an active, respected, influential citizen in the half-organized and manifold interests of a new and energetic community. From his boyhood up he lived in direct and vigorous contact with men and things, not as in older states and easier conditions with words and theories; and both his moral convictions and his intellectual opinions gathered from that contact a supreme degree of that character by which men knew

him—that character which is the most distinctive possession of the best American nature—that almost indistinguishable quality which we call in general clearness or truth, and which appears in the physical structure as health, in the moral constitution as honesty, in the mental structure as sagacity, and in the region of active life as practicalness. This one character, with many sides all shaped by the same essential force and testifying to the same inner influences, was what was powerful in him and decreed for him the life he was to live and the death he was to die. We must take no smaller view than this of what he was. Even his physical conditions are not to be forgotten in making up his character. We make too little always of the physical; certainly we make too little of it here if we lose out of sight the strength and muscular activity, the power of doing and enduring, which the backwoods-boy inherited from generations of hard-living ancestors, and appropriated for his own by a long discipline of bodily toil. He brought to the solution of the question of labor in this country, not merely a mind but a body thoroughly in sympathy with labor, full of the culture of labor, bearing witness to the dignity and excellence of work in every muscle that work had toughened and every sense that work had made clear and true. He could not have brought the mind for his task so perfectly, unless he had first brought the body whose rugged and stubborn health was always contradicting to him the false theories of labor, and always

asserting the true. Who shall say that even with David the son of Jesse, there was not a physical as well as a spiritual culture in the struggle with the lion and the bear which occurred among the sheepfolds, out of which God took him to be the ruler of his people.

As to the moral and mental powers which distinguished him, all embraceable under this general description of clearness or truth, the most remarkable thing in the way in which they blend with one another, so that it is next to impossible to examine them in separation. A great many people have discussed very crudely whether Abraham Lincoln was an intelligent man or not; as if intellect were a thing always of the same sort, which you could percipitate from the other constituents of a man's nature and weight by itself, and compare by pounds and ounces in this man with another. The fact is that in all the simplest characters the line between the mental and moral natures is always vague and indistinct. They run together, and in their best combinations you are unable to discriminate in the wisdom which is their result, how much is moral and how much is intellectual. You are unable to tell whether in the wise acts and words which issue from such a life there is more of the righteousness that comes of a clear conscience or of the sagacity that comes of a clear brain. In more complex characters and under more complex conditions, the moral and the mental lives come to be less healthily combined. They coöperate, they help each other less. They come even

to stand over against each other as antagonists; till we have that vague but most melancholy notion which pervades the life of all elaborate civilization, that goodness and greatness, as we call them, are not to be looked for together, till we expect to see and so do see a feeble and narrow conscientiousness on the one hand and a bad unprincipled intelligence on the other, dividing the suffrages of men.

It is the great boon of such characters as Mr. Lincoln's, that they reunite what God has joined together and man has put asunder. In him was vindicated the greatness of real goodness and the goodness of real greatness. The twain were one flesh. Not one of all the multitudes who stood and looked up to him for direction with such a loving and implicit trust can tell you to-day whether the wise judgments that he gave came most from a strong head or a sound heart. If you ask them they are puzzled. There are men as good as he, but they do bad things. There are men as intelligent as he, but they do foolish things. In him goodness and intelligence combined and made their best result of wisdom. For perfect truth consists not merely in the right constituents of character, but in their right and intimate conjunction. This union of the mental and moral into a life of admirable simplicity is what we most admire in children, but in them it is unsettled and unpractical. But when it is preserved into a manhood, deepened into reliability and maturity, it is that glorified childlikeness, that high and