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Address by Senator Strom Thurmond before Senate prayer group, 1958 August 6

Strom Thurmond

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ADDRESS BY SENATOR STROM THURMOND BEFORE SENATE PRAYER GROUP,
AUGUST 6, 1958.

THE LONG ROAD TO FAITH

1. And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest,
2. And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.
3. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:
4. And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?
5. And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest: It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.
6. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.
7. And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.
8. And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. ACTS 9: 1-8.

I have selected as my scriptural reading today the Biblical account of one of the most dramatic conversions in all the history of Christianity, the conversion of Paul.

Saul of Tarsus was one of the most bitter foes of the early
Christian church. Then, as we are told in the account which I have just read, he was blinded by a vision from heaven. He later received guidance from a disciple of Christ, and he became a great disciple himself and a great missionary.

Not many conversions come with the dramatic force of this conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. There are many paths to the summit of Faith, some short and some long. I love the dramatic story of Saul's conversion, but there is also much substance and inspiration to be found in the story of a conversion that comes as a climax to a long period of searching and doubt.

We might say, with Tennyson:

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

Such an "honest doubt," I believe, characterized the early life of Abraham Lincoln. It was the doubt of a searching mind. Ultimately it was fashioned, in the crucible of a life filled with sorrow, into a firm faith.

I am aware that, in discussing the faith of Abraham Lincoln, I am touching upon a subject that has been a matter of some controversy among Lincoln scholars. Abraham Lincoln never formally joined a church, and there is some evidence that he was an unbeliever. The evidence that he was an unbeliever in the early part of his life is quite convincing.

However, I am willing to accept Lincoln's own word on the subject:

When I left Springfield I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest test of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ.
This is a clear statement, and, I believe, a true one, but undoubtedly an over-simplification. There is much in the story of Lincoln's life to show that he was moving toward the acceptance of God, all through his career. He did not progress in a straight line. His faith was buffeted and shaken by adversity. In the end, he had thought through the problem of his personal relationship to his Creator to a successful conclusion, so that he was prepared for the revelation that came to him on the bloody battlefield of Gettysburg.

Lincoln's preparation for conversion began at his mother's knee. Before he ever learned to read, he had memorized passages from the Bible by hearing his mother recite them as she went about her household work. Lincoln became familiar with the Bible at an early age, and read from the Bible extensively. His speeches, from the time he first began to make speeches, have numerous Biblical quotations and allusions, indicating his understanding of the Bible.

Yet, he refrained from joining the church, and, during his youth, he was known as a man who enjoyed poking fun at the pioneer preachers of the Illinois frontier. Formal creeds and confessions of faith disturbed him. He rebelled, not so much against God, as against the theologians. He once said:

When any church will inscribe over its altar, as its sole qualifications for membership, the Saviour's condensed statement of the substance of both law and gospel, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself," that church will I join with all my heart and with all my mind.

Lincoln made this statement after reaching maturity. Earlier, he had indeed been a scoffer and a mocker. He first began to feel the need for God, many believe, with the death of his first love, Ann Rutledge, in 1835. His grief at her death was so uncontrolled
that many of his friends and neighbors were ready to pronounce him insane. He sought solace in religion, but he did not have the faith to find it there.

Some years later, speaking of his lack of religious conviction, he said:

"Probably it is my lot to go on in a twilight, feeling and reasoning my way through life, as questioning, doubting Thomas did. But in my poor maimed, withered way, I bear with me as I go on a seeking spirit of desire for faith that was with him of olden time, who, in his need, exclaimed, "Help thou my unbelief."

I think this statement is perhaps the best key we have to Lincoln's inner religious life during his days in Illinois. He was an unbeliever, but certainly not an infidel. The infidel is confident that there is no God, but the doubting unbeliever has no confidence either in the existence of God or his non-existence. There is a turmoil of doubt within him, and he knows no peace of mind.

Tracing Lincoln's career, we can see him making progress in his search for God. He was always a good man, with the highest moral principles. Shortly before the death of his mother, he promised her that he would never drink liquor, and he kept that pledge to his death. His strongest profanity, if you wish to call it that, was his use of the phrase, "by Jing." His honesty was legendary, as was his kindness. He was a great and good man.

He was also something of a philosopher, and his conviction that he must stand at all times for the right led him to ponder on the distinction between right and wrong. He turned to his Blackstone and read that law "is a rule of civil conduct prescribed by the supreme power of a state commanding what is right and prohibiting what is wrong." Lincoln used this definition as the basis for a speech he made
in 1855, in which he argued that "law is for the protection, conservation and extension of right things, of right conduct, not for the protection of evil and wrongdoing."

Exploring this matter further, Lincoln found that the distinction between right and wrong is one that comes from God. "This nation under God," as he phrased it in his Gettysburg Address, is ordained to do right, by God's ordinance.

By the time Lincoln was elected President, it appears from many of his recorded statements that he had reached the point of believing in a Divine Being. In Washington, he encountered the supreme trials and heart-breaks that brought him to full religious maturity.

Lincoln was taught to pray by his mother. In his last years, he learned the true value of prayer. He resorted to prayer more often. He urged members of his Cabinet to pray for guidance and assistance.

After the death of his son, in 1862, Lincoln fell into a state of deep melancholy, from which he was eventually lifted by the force of prayer. Indeed, he said that he was sustained not only by his own prayers, but also by the prayers of Christian people all over the country, who prayed for him in his deep bereavement.

Lincoln believed in national prayer. He felt that it had assuaged his grief over the death of his son, and that it would help in national affairs if the people of the United States would join in prayer for the causes they felt to be right.

He asked the nation, through executive proclamations, to pray to God to heal the wounds of the nation, to enlighten the nation to know and to do God's will, to visit with tender care and consolation those who suffer in mind, body or estate, and to bring peace, harmony, tranquility and union.
Finally, as I have already mentioned, Lincoln came to the
supreme moment in his religious experience. His visit to the
battlefield of Gettysburg, with its thousands of graves, both Union
and Confederate, led him to consecrate his life to Christ.

Knowing a little of what had gone before within the soul of
Abraham Lincoln, we can readily imagine how the sight of the
battlefield must have affected him. The death of Ann Rutledge had
helped to turn his steps in the direction of God, and the death of
his son had helped teach him the meaning of prayer. The great
struggle of his life had been that of trying to hold the nation
together. Death and war, these great tragedies were all around him at
Gettysburg. At last, standing there, he perceived the real meaning of
his life.

During his last years, there was a new dignity and a new
confidence about the presence of Abraham Lincoln. The air of sadness
lingered, but his periods of deep melancholy became more rare. He
had achieved comfort in his faith in God.

There are some people who are almost literally born with faith
in God. Believing in God is second nature to them.

Others, like Paul, are converted in a flash, through some
dramatic revelation, or through the sudden realization that God is
needed to make life complete. It has been said that many soldiers
were converted in fox-holes, and it is a natural thing for a man in
mortal danger to have a sudden realization that there is a God and
that He is needed.

I believe that most people must find God only after going
through a period of doubt and confusion, as Lincoln did, though few
have to go through the long period of torment that was Lincoln’s fate.
Lincoln's struggle was an inspiring one. He studied God's word, and tried to apply it to his own life, until, finally, it became the foundation for a strong and unshakable faith.

The evidence clearly shows, that Abraham Lincoln believed in God, in Christ, in the Bible, in prayer, in duty, and in immortality. He could not otherwise have become the great man that he was.