



## Listening for the Sound of Reality

### The Melancholy of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Haddon Spurgeon

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*“Ah!” says one, “I used to laugh at Mrs. so-and-so for being nervous; now that I feel the torture myself, I am sorry that I was ever hard on her.”*

*“Ah!” says another, “I used to think of such-and-such a person that he must be a fool to be always in so gloomy a state of mind; but now I cannot help sinking into the same desponding frames, and oh! I would to God that I had been more kind to him!” Yes, we should feel more for the prisoner if we knew more about the prison.<sup>1</sup>*

At first glance Charles Spurgeon and Abraham Lincoln had little in common.

Spurgeon was a Calvinistic Baptist preacher in England. Lincoln walked away from the Calvinistic Baptist teachings of his youth. Spurgeon was an evangelist. Lincoln was cautious toward evangelists and, at times in his life, would mimic their voices for fun. Spurgeon preached the Gospel to thousands each week, built orphanages, started new churches, and founded a pastors’ college for the poor and uneducated of London. Lincoln was a lawyer and politician laboring for the good of citizens in Illinois and eventually for the country as President of the United States.

The differences between these two nineteenth-century men are significant, yet not conclusive. History, for example, affords both men places of honor. Significantly,

both men demonstrated their greatness while suffering varying degrees of gloom.

Lincoln could say, “I am the most miserable man living.”<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon could begin a sermon with the words: “My brethren, I am quite out of order for addressing you tonight. I feel extremely unwell, excessively heavy and exceedingly depressed.”<sup>3</sup>

Why didn’t depression steal the greatness and rob the dignity of these men? I believe it was because they embraced the miracle and listened for the credible sounds of its reality. In short, Abraham Lincoln and Charles Spurgeon did not give up on life.

#### Life is a Miracle

I gave up on the moon once. It was early evening. The clouds had taken the night off, and the moon saw its opportunity. Commanding center stage, it lit up the dark hemisphere boldly and confidently. My family and I watched the performance through our van windows. We were driving on the highway toward home.

“Do you see the moon, Caleb?” we said almost in unison. Then we stretched our bodies and leaned against seat belts into odd postures. We tried to gain a sense of little Caleb’s car seat perspective. We finally found it and pointed toward the side

window as if we saw someone famous. “There it is Caleb! There’s the moon!”

Caleb’s two-year-old blue eyes adjusted to our pointing view. His eyes widened. “I see dit!” he rejoiced. “I see dit!” We all erupted with celebration.

“What do you think Caleb?” I asked. “What do you think of that moon?”

Caleb paused. He looked intently to the sky. The moonlight reached through the window and lightly touched his left cheek. Then little Caleb surprised us all.

“Broke, Daddy,” he said. He now repeatedly pointed out the window. “The moon broken,” he clarified.

We questioned one another with our eyes and a giggle. I looked again through the window up at center stage. I paused, and then I understood. The moon was not full that night. Caleb’s young perspective did not take the partial dark of the moon for granted. To his eyes, part of the moon seemed to be missing.

“Oh, Caleb,” I said. “The moon is not broken. It is a crescent moon.”

Then Caleb turned to me and said with all seriousness, “Daddy, fix it!” We all laughed out loud. Caleb looked out the window again.

“Daddy can’t fix the moon, buddy,” I chuckled. “It’s too far away and too big.”

Without hesitation Caleb looked me in the eyes and said, “Daddy go there. Daddy, go there and fix moon!”

As my eyes met the expectation in his, I was confounded. I had identified the moon as crescent and stopped further observation. I later found out that my category was mistaken. It was actually a gibbous moon, one of those three-quarter moons, whose performance we watched that night. Caleb had no knowledge of either crescent or gibbous—yet he had seen the missing part of the moon. He had noticed the darkened shape distinct in color from the night sky and yet equally present with the moon’s

brilliance. The luminary was shadowed, and little Caleb was trying to account for the shadow. What I called crescent, Caleb called broken. Caleb not only noticed the unfamiliar dark he wanted it to be made well again.

Caleb’s perspective reminded me of a phone call I received some months earlier. In the fall of 2004, my dear friend, a pastor, took his own life. My family and I temporarily moved to Lexington, Kentucky. From Christmas 2004 to Father’s Day 2005, I served as interim pastor and, along with the congregation, felt the loss, asked questions, and pursued faith. We knew what to call the miserable thing. “Suicide” was its name. “Serious depression” was named the cause. But naming the act and the cause did not explain what happened. Nor did such naming possess the capacity to comfort.

You see, I never saw it coming. Maybe I didn’t look enough at the distinct shades of darkness in my friend’s life. Maybe when I spoke his name, I assumed I already knew him and looked no further. Maybe I forgot that luminaries have shadows—even luminaries such as Lincoln and Spurgeon. Little Caleb saw nuances and not just generalities. I had named the moon, categorized it, and expected nothing more from it. I had given up on the moon in a manner consistent with how some of us give up on life.

Kentucky farmer and acclaimed author Wendell Berry has remarked that “To treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it.”<sup>4</sup> By “miracle” it seems that Berry has in mind the presence and ability of the unknown. We observe life, name it, categorize it, and expect nothing further from it. Consequently, we minimize “variations and uncertainties” in order to comfort ourselves with language that raises the fewest questions, provokes the least fear of the unknown.<sup>5</sup> Miracle, in contrast, reminds us that we are finite, and that life is

mysterious. There is more to life than meets the eye. Therefore, to see the miracle in life we must admit that we do not know all ends. But we must also really believe that the present state of things will not necessarily have the last word. In short, to see the miracle in life is to possess hope.

### The Larger Stories of Our Hope

In his book *The Roots of Sorrow: Reflections on Depression and Hope*, Dr. Richard Winter acknowledges the essential nature of hope. “Our perspective on what is happening is vital to our sense of hope,” Winter observes. “So much depression arises because of a loss of perspective.”<sup>6</sup> Perspective involves both the sidewalk and the horizon. The sufferer of gloom must connect his or her daily melancholy to what William James called “the remoter schemes and hopes” of life.<sup>7</sup> By “remoter schemes,” James referred to what we might call “the larger story” in which our current melancholy acts as one scene or chapter. What larger purpose or narrative does one look to in order to make sense of what presently assaults them?

Archibald Alexander, in his *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, observed that, “religion is often the subject which dwells on the minds of both the melancholy and the insane.”<sup>8</sup> In our search for a larger story from which to make sense of our gloom, religion forges a place in our thoughts—even if that place serves as a punching bag for our moods.

Both Lincoln and Spurgeon connected their present circumstances to the larger story and hopes of God’s providence. The idea that God is at work in unknown ways amid the most difficult of circumstances, acted as a lighthouse from which they could both navigate the miracle of life in their rough waters. God’s activity formed the larger story of our current chapter. So, God—not our circumstances—would have

the last word. Shenk notes that Lincoln’s view of an overruling destiny “was one of his bedrock beliefs. Quoting Shakespeare, he was fond of saying: ‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends/Rough-hew them how we will.’”<sup>9</sup>

Spurgeon saw his own rough-hewn circumstances within the larger story of God’s purposes. On October 19, 1856, the 22-year-old preached for at least 7,000 people in the Surrey Music Hall in the Royal Surrey Gardens. He was in the first year of his marriage, and his twin boys were one month old. Someone in the hall shouted “Fire!” A stampede killed 7 people and seriously injured 28. “My mind seemed to fail me, and my reason reeled,” Spurgeon recalled. “I had to get away, and be alone. I was so unmanned by it. Someone watched me, for they did not know what might happen to me.”<sup>10</sup> “I had almost lost my reason for some three weeks.”<sup>11</sup>

Twenty-five years later, Spurgeon was about to address a large audience during a session of the Baptist Union. All seats were taken, and hundreds were pressing in. Spurgeon walked onto the platform and “seemed entirely unmanned . . . leaning his head on his hand.”

He told the writer that this circumstance so vividly recalled the terrible scene at the Surrey Music Hall, that he felt quite unable to preach. But he did preach, and preach well, though he could not entirely recover the agitation of his nervous system.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of the horrid event deepened Spurgeon’s melancholy frame and bodily ills, which remained with Spurgeon all of his life. But Spurgeon’s hope was the remoter schemes of God’s providence. “Do you recollect how you cried for your minister, that he might be restored to a reason that was then tottering?” Spurgeon

asked his congregation in 1859. “Do you remember how God has been with us . . .?” Then Spurgeon appealed to the unknown but clearly felt purposes of God. “We have had special work, special trial, special deliverance,” he declared.<sup>13</sup>

A divine purpose beyond what one can know and a provision beyond what one can see forms the remoter schemes of life and enables the melancholy to see the miracle within it.

### The Proximity of Despair

But, when one treats life as less than a miracle, he “increases the proximity of despair.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, when there are no “remoter schemes,” no “meta-narratives,” no “larger stories” in which to place our present gloom, the result, William James says, is “anxious trembling.” Anxious trembling often results from what Jennifer Michael Hecht identifies as “a meaning rupture” within our lives. The larger story seems fractured or unknowable. “On one side,” Hecht says, “there is a world in our heads. . . a world of reason and plans, love, and purpose. On the other side there is the world beyond our human life—an equally real world in which there is no sign of caring or value, planning or judgment, love or joy.”<sup>15</sup>

And for others of us, the proximity of despair draws closer because “the world in our heads” is often filled with something other than “reason, plans, love and purpose.” We ourselves—not just our larger stories—are ruptured. “There is a kind of mental darkness” Spurgeon explains “in which you are disturbed, perplexed, worried, troubled—not, perhaps, about anything tangible.”<sup>16</sup> “Remember,” Spurgeon said, “some persons are constitutionally sad.”<sup>17</sup> Lincoln likewise preferred to describe melancholy as “a misfortune [and] not a fault.”<sup>18</sup> Natural causes, rather than “some

false and ruinous suggestion of the Devil” forms its foundations.<sup>19</sup> While Spurgeon left room for a religious depression in which sin and Satan had a role, he yet agreed that “we sometimes fall into sorrowful spiritual diseases” in our minds “apart from sin.” “We may get depressed in spirit,” he says. “We may be nervous, fearful, timid; we may almost come to the borders of despair.”<sup>20</sup> The condition of one’s body further impacts these natural moods. “When the body is in a low condition” Spurgeon asserted, “the soul also sinks.”<sup>21</sup>

Bodily pains, natural temperaments, tragic circumstances, spiritual activity; each of these requires a larger story which can handle what these experiences require of a person. Yet, many of our larger stories are themselves ruptured of meaning. We must therefore anchor our hope to something real. “Without realistic hope,” Winter said, “all is lost.” Realistic hope is “the door out of the blackness of depression and despair.”<sup>22</sup>

We require a larger story that possesses an authentic capacity to handle the realities of our gloom.

### The Sound of Reality

“Here is the real core of the religious problem,” James said. “The nature of life prompts one to cry, ‘Help! Help!’ No prophet can claim to bring a final message unless he says things that will have a sound of reality in the ears of victims such as these. . . . The deliverance must come in as strong a form as the complaint, if it is to take effect.”<sup>23</sup>

In other words, we require more than a placebo for our larger story. The weight of our reality dismisses simplistic or trite references to religion, faith, God, and providence. In his second inaugural address, Lincoln spoke to both sides conflicted in the Civil War.

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.<sup>24</sup>

For some, the misuse or naïve use of the Bible moves them off of religion to find the sound of reality for life. Lincoln, on the other hand, seems increasingly to have found the sound of reality in the larger story found in portions of the Bible.

In the summer of 1863 a despondent Lincoln sat down on the sofa, took a small Bible and began to read. Elizabeth Keckly, Mary Lincoln's dressmaker, noticed that Lincoln's countenance slowly changed. Hope found his face again. Desiring to know what brought this comfort, "Keckly pretended she had dropped something and went behind where Lincoln was sitting so she could look over his shoulder." Lincoln was reading the book of Job.<sup>25</sup> Alexander observed that "melancholy persons are very apt to seize on the dark side of religion, as affording food for the morbid state of their minds."<sup>26</sup> Many would consider Job and the other wisdom books of the Bible such as Proverbs or Ecclesiastes as containing these darker sides. Job, after all, is the story of a just man whose children and servants die and who loses all of his possessions and must come to terms with God amid this unwarranted suffering. Ecclesiastes similarly bellows the repeated phrase: "Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" These two books alone ask most of the recurring questions that human history has wrestled with as they account for the meaning rupture of our larger stories. Perhaps Lincoln found something of Berry's

"miracle" in these biblical pages. All questions are not answered here; the depth of human misery and emotion is fully explored. In these books God relates to the miserable and the questioning person and not with trite or simplistic descriptions or answers to life.

I, too, wrestle with a melancholy temperament and bear the scars of tragic circumstances. With Lincoln I hear the sound of reality echoing on the pages of Ecclesiastes as it speaks of madness and folly. I, too, can say at times that "I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind" (Eccl. 2:17 ESV).

Spurgeon likewise turned to the Bible as possessing the capacity to handle the darker sides of life. Spurgeon's focus was Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus dripped with sweat like blood. There He was betrayed, and these scenes became for Spurgeon a picture of the "mental depression" of Jesus.<sup>27</sup> For Spurgeon, Jesus' mental depression provides empathy from God that can meet the realistic requirements for hope among the downcast and the troubled.

Along with Spurgeon I have found the empathy of Jesus as a help. The Bible describes Him as a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . ." (Isa. 53:3 ESV). One darker Bible passage in particular has served well as a "remoter scheme" for me. "In the days of Jesus' life on earth," it says, "he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears . . ." (Heb. 5:7 NIV). In passages such as this, Lincoln and Spurgeon found a larger story that resonated with the reality they faced.

From those pages hope was made realistic because it was connected to ruptures of our local and larger stories. Lincoln and Spurgeon may have disagreed then with one of William James's conclusions. For James, the sick-soul

temperament may need a coarser religion, “revivalistic, orgiastic, with blood and miracles and supernatural operations.”<sup>28</sup> Though Spurgeon more than Lincoln would identify with the revivalistic aspect of the Bible’s sound of reality, neither Lincoln nor Spurgeon seemed to require the “coarser . . . orgiastic” idea of hope that James implies. In a turn of phrase reminiscent of Lincoln’s wit, Spurgeon said that God “will either make the burden lighter or the back stronger.”<sup>29</sup> Both men saw the mystery of God as a means, not of escape, but of strength. In the context of God’s providence, they sought a realistic view of life. Perseverance, intentionality toward nature, the cultivation of humor and poetry, one day at a time, within the context of a community of care, made sense. The presence of hope fosters a capacity for taking another step and embracing another day.

### Promises: Common and Mystical

Perhaps the idea of “promise” describes the practice of realistic hope. Lincoln exemplifies what we might call “common promises.” Fanny McCullough’s father died in the war. Lincoln wrote to comfort her. He began by describing the nature of life.

“In this sad world of ours,” he wrote, “sorrow comes to all; and, to the young it comes with bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares. The older have learned to ever expect it.” Lincoln then identifies how our gloom can distort our capacity for seeing miracle: “You can not now realize that you will ever feel better. Is this not so? And yet it is a mistake.” Then Lincoln tries to help Fanny see the presence of common promise in her life. “You are sure to be happy again,” he wrote. “To know this, which is certainly true, will make you seem less miserable now. I have had experience enough to know what I say; and you need only to believe it, to feel

better at once.” The promise, however, refers to a hope that is not fanciful but realistic. “The memory of your dear Father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer, and holier sort than have known before. . . . Perfect relief is not possible,” Lincoln said, “except with time.”<sup>30</sup>

Common promise does not remove people from their present circumstances. It rather fortifies their ability to handle what each day really brings. Spurgeon agreed with Lincoln’s commonsense awareness of miracle. Speaking to the suicidal in one of his sermons he said: “You and I have not the slightest idea of what is in store for us on earth.”<sup>31</sup>

Spurgeon’s more personal views regarding the larger story of God’s working prompted him to allow for mystical promises as well. “It is always a blessing to remember that for every affliction there is a promise” in the Bible he says, “a promise which meets the case and was made on purpose for it.”<sup>32</sup> Spurgeon would point the afflicted to the words of Jesus, for example, as Jesus spoke to the darker realities of life.

Lincoln’s common promise reminds what the aged among us have learned. That time may not heal all wounds, but it can nuance our perspectives on those wounds. With time we can mend. Spurgeon’s allowance for mystical promise reminds us of the possibility that one can make contact with God and speak to divinity regarding one’s troubles and heavy burdens. Spurgeon held out the promise that divine empathy was relationally present in the world.

### Conclusion

I gave up on the moon once. I named its phase and looked no further. To look further is to risk. Lingering with nuances can increase contact with sorrow. “For in much wisdom is much vexation,” the writer

of Ecclesiastes says, “and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (1:18 ESV). Noticing a distinct shade of darkness may require us to encounter someone who calls these shadows broken and asks us to move toward them. Moving toward the shadows exposes our temperaments, our tragedies, and the soundness of the larger stories onto which we hold. Here we may have to admit that we do not know all ends and yet take another step. This risk rewards with the sound of reality. This risk is what Wendell Berry called treating life as if it is a miracle.

But risk is equally met when giving up. One loses the opportunity to hear and own the last word that would have come had we not stopped. Despair is managed by miracle. To assume a posture of exhaustive knowledge of one’s condition is to increase the proximity of despair and to damage hope. Though they were different men, Lincoln and Spurgeon both derived from the larger story that hope does not require the absence of melancholy. Hope is something that one seeks in the midst of it.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “A Troubled Prayer” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 13 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 196.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln’s Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 43.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Sermon from a Sick Preacher” in *The Sword and the Trowel*, (November 1869), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), 10.

<sup>5</sup> See, Joshua Wolf Shenk, “A Melancholy of Mine Own” in *Unholy Ghost: Writers on Depression*, ed. Nell Casey (New York: Perennial HarperCollins, 2002), 246-47.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Winter, *The Roots of Sorrow: Reflections on Depression and Hope* (Wheaton, IL; Crossway Books, 1986), 292.

<sup>7</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 130.

<sup>8</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (1844; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Shenk, *Lincoln’s Melancholy*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Joy in Place of Sorrow” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 43 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 446.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Belief in the Resurrection” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 61 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 148.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Chapter 50, (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 234.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>14</sup> Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt, A History: The Great Doubters and their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), xii.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Night and Jesus Not There!” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 51 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 457.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Joy, Joy, Forever!” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 36 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 373.

<sup>18</sup> Shenk, *Lincoln’s Melancholy*, 89.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Our Youth Renewed” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 60 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 462.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “The Saddest Cry from the Cross” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 48 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 656.

<sup>22</sup> Winter, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 292.

<sup>23</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 147, 148.

<sup>24</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau and David Hein, *Essays on Lincoln’s Faith and Politics*, Vol. 4, ed., Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 11.

<sup>25</sup> Shenk, *Lincoln’s Melancholy*, 193.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "Gethsemane" in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 9 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 103. Also, "The Overflowing Cup" in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 15 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 388.

<sup>28</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 148.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Sword and the Trowel* (January 1877; Ages Digital Library, 1998), 15.

<sup>30</sup> Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy*, 188-189.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "Elijah Fainting" in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 47 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 285.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "Marah, or The Bitter Waters Sweetened" in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 17 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), 301.

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