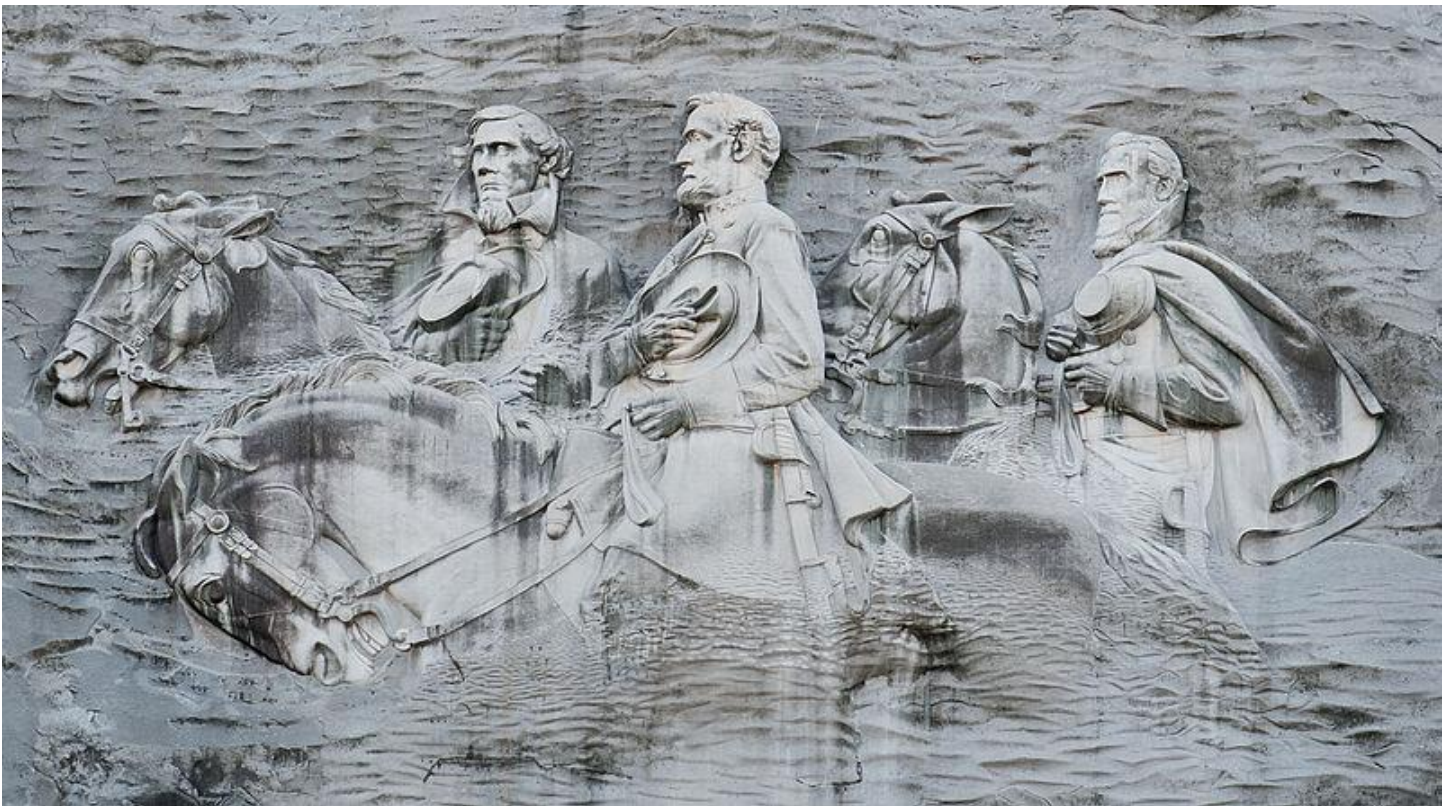


Jefferson Davis:
A Study of Providence
in the life of a Public Man
Res accendent lumina rebus



By Dick Jones

Prologue

There is perhaps no man in American history whose life so clearly demonstrates that “the race is not to the swift, and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to the man of ability” (Ecclesiastes 9:11) as Jefferson F. Davis. In an age in which success is measured by numbers, Davis is both an enigma and a rebuke. Largely ignored by contemporary Americans, the few that consider him at all usually regard him as an object of derision. He is the antithesis of the American success story. Unable to fathom how God or fate, depending on one’s worldview, would not reward a man possessing Davis’ abilities, education, and attainments, assumptions are made about his character and that of the Lost Cause¹ he has come to represent. Ironically, this man of impeccable integrity and character was the apotheosis of the American Republican ideal.

Hudson Strode, mid-twentieth century biographer of Jefferson Davis and noted Southern historian described him as “an American patriot.” He continued—

“He came of patriot stock; his father had fought in the Revolutionary War, three older brothers had risked their lives in the war of 1812. Up to 1861, few indeed had taken more

¹ Current, Richard N., ed. *The Encyclopedia of the Confederacy*. New York, New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1998:334. The phrase *Lost Cause* came to refer to the loss of the Confederacy to Northern aggression. For more detail, see End Notes.*

dynamic interest in the welfare and destiny of the United States than Jefferson Davis. For eleven years, from the ages of sixteen to twenty-seven, he had been in the training and service of the United States Army...during the War with Mexico he proved an outstanding hero. In the Senate he served notably as a statesman whose influence helped mold the destiny of a nation. As Secretary of War...he gained a reputation second to none...Up to 1861 Davis' enormous contribution to the vitality of democracy was freely admitted and praised by the entire press. No living men at the time held so gloriously that combined record of conspicuous service on the battlefield and statesmanship. When he departed from the Senate chamber forever in January 1861, as Allen Tate said, he left it smaller. 'It would never be the same again; he was the last of the Senate greats.'"²

Those who would attempt to dismiss Jefferson Davis as irrelevant to the development of the early American Republic are benighted and impertinent. Those who attempt to besmirch his character and morality must contend with his conspicuous and enduring record of civic service and personal morality.

² Strode, Hudson. *Jefferson Davis*. New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955:XIX-XX.

In Jefferson Davis, the *providence of God* is manifest in a way that creates disquietude in the spiritually complacent. It is often presumed that God is compelled to bless and reward the hard-working, well-educated and morally upright. It is assumed that truth and justice will always prevail. Yet here is a man who embodied and possessed the best that America had to offer—an early parochial and classical education which prepared him to succeed at West Point—one of the premier institutions of higher education in the country—heroic service in the army, laudable public service, and a successful career as a farmer and plantation owner. He was a man known for his integrity and truthfulness. In Davis’ life, *God’s providence*³ was evinced in an unexpected way, perhaps best expressed by an unknown Confederate poet:

I asked God for strength that I might achieve.
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things.
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy.
I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

³ Sproul, R.C. *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*. Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992: 61-62. The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines providence as “his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.” For more detail, see End Notes.**

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

Introduction—An Education

Jefferson Davis was born on June 3, 1808 in Kentucky to Samuel Emory and Jane Davis. He was the tenth and last child for the couple. His middle name, Finis, which means the End, was perhaps the parents' way of expressing that intent.⁴ The first of many interesting examples of *God's providence* in his life is seen in the fact that Davis was born within one year and one hundred miles of Abraham Lincoln. Both men were born in Kentucky. Both families would soon move to other states to settle, the Lincolns north of the Mason Dixon Line to the state of Illinois and the Davis's south to Mississippi.

Young Davis would be diligently educated. At age five, he attended a small log cabin school close to home in Woodville, Mississippi. Concerned that he receive a good education, his father sent him to Kentucky to attend St. Thomas Catholic School when he was seven. This was remarkable not only because of his age but also for the fact that

⁴ Allen, Felicity. *Jefferson Davis: Unconquerable Heart*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999:31.

Samuel Davis was a Baptist. Nevertheless, young Jefferson was embraced by the Dominican friars who administered St. Thomas. There he learned the rudiments of English and Latin grammar and acquired a life-long respect for the Catholic faith.⁵

After two years at St. Thomas, little Jeff's mother insisted that he return home. But he would soon leave for another school—Jefferson College, a good classical school in Washington, about ten miles from Natchez, Mississippi. It would not be long until an acceptable school was opened in Wilkinson County, allowing him to live at home. Here he thrived and matured, doing the things most Southern boys of that time did—hunting, fishing, riding horses, and romping with his favorite dogs. He would be known the rest of his life for his “horsemanship.” Others would describe his ability to ride so well and gracefully as “a thing of beauty.”⁶

At the age of thirteen, young Jefferson was already prepared for study at the university level. Subsequently, he began his college education at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. This was considered one of the best colleges in the young Republic, certainly of those west of Princeton.⁷ Though Transylvania University had been started as a Presbyterian seminary in 1789, by the time Jefferson matriculated it was “in the hands” of Dr. Howell Holly of New England. He was a Socinian

⁵ Strode, *Jefferson Davis*, 16.

⁶ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 48.

⁷ Strode, *Jefferson Davis*, 22.

but still a diligent educator. His stated objective was to “send out lawyers, physicians, statesmen, poets, orators, and savants who will make the nation feel them.”⁸

Perhaps the Unitarianism of Holly would have negatively influenced the young Davis but for the profound impact of the college’s Vice President, Reverend Robert H. Bishop. He was a “tall, gaunt Scotsman of large attachments and varied knowledge...and a strict Presbyterian.” Davis would later describe the faith of Bishop as “that of a child, not doubting nor questioning, and believing (the bible) literally as it was written.” According to contemporary Davis biographer Felicity Allen,

“Clearly, Mr. Bishop, not Horace Holly, made the dominant impression on the young Davis. He obviously confirmed those orthodox and conservative views of the Bible and religion that Davis held for the rest of his life...He never doubted...that Jesus was the Savior.”

A “quite, quite worn-out” bible could have been found beside Davis’ bed throughout his life.⁹ *God’s providence* was evident in the presence of Robert Bishop at Transylvania University.

When Jeff was sixteen years of age, his father died of malarial fever. His older brother, Joseph, would step into the role of father to Jeff from that time on. It would be Joseph who insisted that Jeff accept an

⁸ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 50-51.

⁹ *Ibid*, 52.

“appointment as a cadet in the United States Military Academy” at West Point. Jeff wanted to attend the University of Virginia, the college founded by his namesake, Thomas Jefferson. A deal was struck between the brothers; if after one year at West Point, Jeff still desired to attend the University of Virginia he could transfer. He never did.¹⁰

His Early Military Career

It would be Secretary of War John C. Calhoun who would issue Jefferson Davis’ “commission of Cadet” on March 11, 1824. This was another instance of *God’s providence* in the life of Jefferson Davis. Calhoun would be the greatest Southern statesman of the nineteenth century and perhaps the most profound American political thinker since James Madison. Davis and Calhoun would one day become friends and Calhoun would have a significant impact on Davis’ political views.¹¹

Davis would finish “twenty-third among the thirty-three members of his graduating class” at West Point. In addition to the education and discipline he received there, he would establish enduring friendships with some of the most notable figures of mid-nineteenth century America. Among his classmates and a close friend was Albert Sidney Johnston, hero of the Texas Revolution and the second highest ranking general

¹⁰ Ibid, 56.

¹¹ Ibid, 57.

officer of the newly formed Confederate States of America of 1861. Leonidas Polk, who would become a notable Episcopalian Bishop and Confederate General, would also remain a close friend until Polk's death at the battle of Atlanta in 1864. Other West Point classmates were Albert E. Church, John R. B. Gardener, Theophilus Holmes, James Izard, Joseph Johnson, Robert E. Lee, Thomas Drayton, Gabriel Raynes, Albert Blanchard, John B. Magruder, L.B. Winthrop, and Yankee-controlled Fort Sumter Commander Robert Anderson. All of these cadets would become men of influence, and most would attain the highest levels of military rank during the War Between the States.¹²

After graduating from West Point, Jefferson Davis' first post was in St. Louis. Arriving in 1828, he was soon assigned to Fort Crawford in the "Indian country." His responsibility was to protect the far-flung settlers from Indian depredations. It was during this time that he caught pneumonia and, apart from the care of his slave and lifelong friend, Jim Pemberton, he might have died. He did recover but suffered from neuralgia and other ill effects the rest of his life.¹³

The commander of Fort Crawford was Colonel Zachary Taylor, who would one day be President of the United States. Taylor's daughter, Sara Knox, soon captured Jefferson Davis' heart. They would eventually marry. His courtship of Sara would be difficult due to Colonel Taylor's

¹² Strode, *Jefferson Davis*, 47.

¹³ Canfield, Cass. *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis*. New York, New York: Fairfax Press, 1981: 12.

refusal to grant his blessing to the prospect of marriage between the two. Davis would serve throughout “the old Northwest and the South” in subsequent years under Colonel Taylor. The Black Hawk War of 1832 afforded him his first extensive experience in fighting Indians.¹⁴ Another interesting example of *God’s providence* in the lives of Davis and Lincoln is the fact that Lincoln also fought the Black Hawk War of 1832. Lincoln was the Captain of a company of volunteers from New Salem, Illinois.¹⁵

Davis would resign his commission as an officer in the army in June of 1835. This was chiefly due to his marriage to Sara Knox Taylor on June 17, 1835. Her father, Colonel Taylor, had resisted the marriage because he did not want his daughter to marry a military man. He had said:

“I will be damned if another daughter of mine should marry into the Army. I know enough of the family life of officers; I scarcely know my own children, or they me.”

Regarding the prospect of having Davis as a son-in-law, he had said, “I have no personal objection to Lieutenant Davis.” Now, with Davis’ resignation, there was no reason to object to the marriage. According to some, Jefferson Davis had also “become disillusioned with the army” and

¹⁴ Ibid, 16.

¹⁵ Masters, Edgar Lee. *Lincoln: The Man*. Columbia, South Carolina: The Foundation for American Education, 1997:29.

was considering a career with the railroad, though he would never pursue it.¹⁶ In *God's providence*, there would be greater things for Davis to do.

Marriage and Plantation Life

Jefferson Davis and Sara Knox were married at the home of “her father’s sister near Louisville, and with her father’s (implicit) consent.” Aunt Elizabeth’s home was known as Beechland and was located about three miles from Louisville. All of the bride’s relatives living nearby attended the ceremony. The Reverend Mr. Ashe, rector of Louisville’s Christ Episcopal Church, officiated the ceremony.¹⁷

Sara was described as having a “sympathetic, amiable, and charming” disposition. She was also “energetic” and well-prepared to perform the tasks usually expected of the mistress of a plantation.¹⁸ Jefferson Davis’ bride was a lovely young woman, and she and Jefferson were excited about what promised to be a rich and rewarding life together. After the marriage ceremony, they sailed down the Mississippi River on their way to Jefferson’s brother Joseph’s plantation, the Hurricane, named for a violent storm that had taken the life of one of Joseph’s sons. The large plantation consisted of around five thousand acres and a “virtual village” from which the needs of the household and the working of the

¹⁶ Canfield, *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis*, 17.

¹⁷ Strode, *Jefferson Davis*, 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 99.

plantation were carried out. It included a huge house with “galleries that run nearly around it, upstairs and down.” It also had a—

“very large barn, stables for thirty-odd horses, coach house, confined commissary and overseer’s apartment, the ‘Hall of Justice’ (where slaves held court), the slaves’ hospital, workshops where shoes, wagons, and plows were made, and ‘a small hamlet of whitewashed cabins’—the quarters for the field hands. Behind the ‘annex’ was the kitchen and laundry, with ‘bedrooms above for the house servants.’”

Joseph was a practicing attorney in Mississippi in addition to being a very successful planter. The Hurricane would be Jefferson and Sara’s first home until they could establish their own plantation.¹⁹

To escape the malaria season, Jefferson and his bride soon traveled to his sister’s plantation, Locust Grove, near Bayou Sara, Louisiana. It was believed at the time that malaria or marsh miasm, was the result of people being “unacclimated” to the region. Sara being new to the area would be safer in Bayou Sara, or so they thought. “Jeff and Sara were probably bitten by *Anopheles* mosquitos before they ever reached Locust Grove.” Soon after their arrival, they both became seriously ill. Sara Knox died September 15, 1835, just three short months after being married. Jefferson Davis almost died as well and would struggle from the after-effects of “the

¹⁹ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 90.

fever” for the rest of his life. He would never fully recover from the *afflicting providence* of the loss of his beloved bride and remained a widower for many years afterward.²⁰

Joseph Davis would give Jefferson about five hundred acres from his plantation to encourage him to remain in Mississippi. The original tract was “immediately downriver from Hurricane.” Later, Jefferson would acquire another one thousand acres.²¹ This plantation would be called Brierfield, because it was covered with briars. Following an extensive period of recuperation, allowing him to regain his strength, Jefferson began to clear the land of Brierfield. He planned to plant cotton. By October 27, 1836, Jefferson Davis had acquired twenty-three slaves and James Pemberton, his friend and slave, was made his “plantation manager.” He became successful as a planter almost immediately.²²

Public Service

Joseph continued to have substantial influence on the direction of his brother’s life. He encouraged him visit Washington “to form some acquaintance with the workings of the machinery of Government.” Jefferson had the opportunity to do more than that while in Washington. He met President Van Buren, several Congressmen, and the young Senator

²⁰ Ibid, 93.

²¹ Davis, William C. *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1991:73.

²² Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 95.

from New Hampshire, Franklin Pierce. It was Pierce who would impress Davis the most and who was most likely responsible for Jefferson's growing interest in politics. Pierce was a state's rights Democrat of whom Davis said he "knew no North, no South, no East, no West, but steadily adhered to the fundamental truths of the Democratic Party, which guarded the interests of all sectors by strict construction of the Constitution."²³

In 1844, two years after the Washington trip, Davis ran for Congress as a Democrat. Unfortunately, his district was predominantly Whig, resulting in Davis' losing the election. In *God's providence*, the loss was accompanied by a victory of sorts. During the same time, Varina Howell visited the Hurricane. She would be the first woman he had shown an interest in since losing his beloved wife some nine years earlier. "Jefferson was attracted to her at once..." She was attractive, clever, and well read, and "a brilliant conversationalist."²⁴

Jefferson Davis married Varina Howell on February 26, 1845. The ceremony was in Natchez at the Howell family home known as the Briars. They would travel by steamboat to New Orleans for their honeymoon, stopping at Woodville on the way so that Varina could meet his eighty-five year-old mother and his sister Lucinda. Arriving at Brierfield in April of 1845, Varina began her life as a mistress of a southern plantation.²⁵

²³ Ibid, 97.

²⁴ Canfield, *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis*, 22.

²⁵ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 109.

Jeff was already “active in the state Democratic Party.” Though he and Varina were quite content on their isolated plantation, Jeff would be running for Congress again by late 1845. According to Varina, his conviction was that—

“Man is not born for himself alone, or for his family only...In a land of self-government, no one has the right to wholly withdraw himself from connection with public affairs...A citizen’s duty to his country involved not only participating in, but understanding the complicated machinery of the best political organism which has ever existed among men.”

In *God’s providence*, this public man was elected to Congress and “took his seat in the House of Representatives of the Twenty-ninth Congress on December 8, 1845.”²⁶

Texas was admitted into the Union on December 19, 1845. Mexico continued to argue for the Nueces River as the southern border of Texas. Texas claimed the Rio Grande. Davis supported the latter. “On May 8 and 9, 1846, General Zachary Taylor’s army clashed with the Mexican Army north of the Rio Grande River.” President Polk declared that a state of war existed between Mexico and the United States. Congress, after some debate, issued a formal declaration of war, which Davis supported. He would leave office in order to lead a regiment of volunteers from his

²⁶ Ibid, 127.

home state of Mississippi against the army of Santa Anna in Mexico.²⁷ Davis would distinguish himself in the War by heroic action and would sustain an injury that would plague him for many years. He was known for many years as the Hero of Buena Vista, the sight of a decisive battle in Mexico in which Davis played a critical role.

Following his service during the War with Mexico, Davis was appointed to complete the term of deceased Mississippi Senator Jesse Speight. He took the oath of office on December 6, 1847. In 1850 he ran and won the seat in his own right. He remained in office until appointed by President Franklin Pierce as Secretary of War in 1853.²⁸ Once again, *God's providence* is evident as it is recalled that he became Franklin Pierce's friend so many years earlier on his first trip to Washington.

During Davis' tenure as Secretary of War, "he was responsible for a fifty percent increase in the standing army" and several other substantial improvements in the country's military. He would remain in the position until resigning on March 4, 1857 in order to take his seat in the United States Senate once again.²⁹ He remained in the Senate until compelled to resign after his home state of Mississippi seceded from the Union. Ironically, in *God's providence*, this public man would serve so effectively that he is credited with many of the improvements to the

²⁷ Kennedy, James Ronald and Kennedy, Walter Donald. *Was Jefferson Davis Right?* Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 1998, 47.

²⁸ Canfield, *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis*, 34.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

military which would be used to defeat his beloved southern Confederacy. Most historians credit Jefferson Davis with being the most effective Secretary of War in United States history, with the possible exception of the extraordinary John C. Calhoun.

Beginning a Family

Jefferson and Varina had their first baby on July 30, 1852. They named the little boy Samuel Emory Davis. Another *afflicting providence* occurred in Davis' life on June 13, 1854, when little Samuel, affectionately called "Le Man" by his adoring father, died. For many months, Jefferson Davis would "walk half the night" and work "fiercely all day" to cope with his grief. In *God's providence*, it was the death of their precious little boy that awakened Varina to her need of God. Baptized as an infant in the Episcopal Church, Varina would be confirmed in her faith in 1856.³⁰

Their second child was born on February 25, 1855. The little girl was named Margaret Howell Davis. Their third child was born January 16, 1857. They named him Jeff, Jr. Joseph Evan, whom his father would call "Little Man," was born on April 18, 1859. In *God's providence*, both Davis and Lincoln would lose a young son during the War Between the

³⁰ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 208.

States. Little Joseph would tragically fall from the porch of the White House of the Confederacy, fracturing his skull. The fifth child, William Howell, was born in 1861 and their last child, a little girl they would name Varina Anne, was born on June 27, 1864. It was this last daughter who would be called “Winnie” and who would be revered by the post-war South as the “Daughter of the Confederacy.” Sadly, Jefferson Davis would outlive all four of his sons.³¹

Immediately before the War Between the States

Senator Jefferson Davis was never a fire-eating advocate of secession. He was considered a political moderate by virtually all who knew him. Yet his views on the constitutionality of secession and states’ rights were a matter of record. In a speech given on November 4, 1860, Davis said that he—

“was not for a dissolution of the Union, but secession was part of ‘the vital principles of states’ rights’, and if given up would leave the states at the mercy of ‘a consolidated and omnipotent Federal Government.’”³²

Here a prescient public man would get to the crux of the crisis facing Americans who understood the ramifications of rejecting the

³¹ *Ibid, passim.*

³² *Ibid, 230.*

constitutionality of secession. Apart from the states and the constitutional authority they possessed, nothing stood between the American people and Federal despotism.

Davis also saw the flaw that inhered in Seward's specious and subjective higher law doctrine, which would be used by Northern abolitionists to justify their rejection of the Constitution. In a speech addressing a gathering of northern Democrats in New York City before the War, he said—

“This higher-law doctrine, it strikes me, is the most convenient one I ever heard of for the criminal. What serenity was there if every born man could find ‘in his own heart a higher law than...society, the Constitution and the Bible?’ The preachers of it ‘should be tarred and feathered, and whipped’ under a different ‘higher’ law which brought justice to ‘those who would otherwise escape’ it.”³³

He was not alluding to Seward's bad character and motivations from a distance. He knew him well. During a visit to the Davis' home, Varina asked Seward if he believed the abolitionist rhetoric he often used. She later described his response:

“He looked at me quizzically, and smilingly answered, ‘I do not, but these appeals...are potent, to affect the rank and file of the

³³ Ibid, 240.

North.’ Mr. Davis said, very much shocked... ‘But, Mr. Seward, do you never speak from conviction alone?’ ‘Never,’ answered he. Mr. Davis raised up his blindfolded head (he was almost blind with pain from a serious illness) and, with much heat, whispered, ‘as God is my judge, I never spoke from any other motive.’ Mr. Seward put his arm around him and gently laid down his head, saying, with great tenderness, ‘I know you do not—I am always sure of it.’”³⁴

Jefferson Davis would never argue against man’s ultimate accountability to God’s law as transcendent standard of what is good and just, but he believed that the “written Constitution—a fixed standard—was one of America’s ‘blessings’ and unless it could be objectively shown to contradict the clear and explicit teachings of Scripture, it was a compact which honorable men ought to uphold.”³⁵

The state of South Carolina would become the first state to secede when it passed its Ordinance of Secession on December 20, 1860. The other six states of the Deep South would follow in short order over the next two months. Mississippi enacted its Ordinance of Secession on January 9, 1861.³⁶ Shortly after this, Jefferson Davis would resign his seat in the United State Senate. He began his farewell address given on January 21st—

³⁴ Ibid, 233.

³⁵ Ibid, 239-240.

³⁶ O’Brien, Robert, Ed., *The Encyclopedia of the South*. New York, New York: Smithmark Publishers, Inc.: 192, 277.

“I rise, Mr. President, for the purpose of announcing to the Senate that I have satisfactory evidence that the State of Mississippi by a solemn ordinance of her people in convention assembled, has declared her separation from the United States. Under these circumstances, of course, my functions are terminated here.”³⁷

He continued by reiterating his position on states’ rights and the southern states’ understanding of their constitutional rights, summarizing the history of the issues at stake. He closed with a decidedly irenic tone reflecting the public man’s personal affection for his colleagues, saying—

“In the course of my service here, associated at different times with a great variety of Senators, I see now around me some with whom I have served long; there have been points of collision; but whatever of offense there has been to me, I leave here; I carry with me no hostile remembrance. Whatever offense I have given which has not been redressed, or for which satisfaction has not been demanded, I have, Senators, in this hour of our parting, to offer you my apology for any pain which in heat of discussion, I have inflicted. I go hence unencumbered of the remembrance of any injury reserved, and having discharged the

³⁷ Farewell Address. January 21, 1861. Davis papers. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1992: Volume 7, 18.

duty of making the only reparation in my power for any injury offered.”³⁸

The scene in the Senate chamber was described as “crowded to excess” with “profound silence, broken only by repeated applause.”³⁹ In the audience “there was scarcely a dry eye.”⁴⁰ In *God’s providence*, a terrible tragedy was about to be played out over the next four years on American, but especially Southern soil.

The President of the Confederacy

Jefferson Davis returned to Mississippi to assume command of the Army of Mississippi. Governor John J. Pettus had “commissioned him a major general.”⁴¹ But God, in *His providence*, had a different role for Jefferson Davis. On February 4, delegates from six of the first seven seceded states met in Montgomery, Alabama to establish a provisional government for the Confederate States of America. (The representatives from Texas were not able to travel there in time.) They would unanimously choose Davis as their President. According to Davis biographer Felicity Allen—

³⁸ Ibid, 22.

³⁹ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁰ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 252.

⁴¹ Ibid, 266.

“When the messenger brought the news, he found the general and his lady taking rose cuttings in the garden at Brierfield. From the look on her husband’s face as he read the paper, Varina thought there had been a family tragedy. After a few minutes’ painful silence he told me, as a man might speak of a sentence of death.”⁴²

He had received word with great trepidation that the Provisional Congress of the Confederate States of America had elected him their President. Later he explained to a friend why he accepted the position that he clearly did not want.

“The trial was too great and the result too doubtful to justify one in declining any post to which he was assigned; therefore I accepted.”

William Lowndes Yancey, Alabama fire-eater and ardent secessionist, would introduce the President-elect to a large crowd upon Davis’ arrival in Montgomery with the often quoted words, “The man and the hour have met.”⁴³ President Davis faced a formidable challenge, and he knew it, even if others did not.

Jefferson Davis would take office with two overwhelming tasks before him. First, he had to organize and establish a government for the new country immediately. There was no governmental infrastructure—no

⁴² Ibid, 267.

⁴³ Ibid, 268.

treasury, no postal service, nothing. Second, he had to organize and establish an army and navy, and then wage war against an established country with overwhelming superiority in arms, industrial capacity, railways, and man-power.

The population of the North was 22 million and that of the Confederacy 9.4 million, of which 3.5 million were slaves. The North would use “about forty-four percent of that manpower pool” or some 2 million men. “The Confederacy fielded seventy-five percent or approximately 850,000 men. The Yankee army almost always enjoyed a heavy numerical advantage, sometimes ranging as high as four to one.” The Confederacy experienced a casualty rate of about “sixty-two percent of those who served.” The Yankees’ casualty rate was only “thirty-one percent of those who served.” The North’s “manufacturing output in 1860 was ten times that of the South,” not to mention the superior quality of output. “The North had two and a half times the railroad mileage of the South and was able to lay track and build rolling stock as the war continued.” In the South, existing railroads deteriorated, and no new rolling stock or locomotives were manufactured. The list of Northern advantages could go on and on. Suffice it to say that President Davis and the Confederacy faced an almost impossible challenge.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Johnson, Ludwell H. *North Against South: The American Iliad 1848-1877*. Columbia, South Carolina: The Foundation for American Education, 1993:88.

Over the four years of war, the Southern public opinion of President Davis corresponded directly to “the fortunes of the Confederacy.” Following the end of the conflict, “much of the blame for Southern defeat rested on his shoulders.” Even subsequent generations of supposedly objective historians have denigrated Jefferson Davis’ character and abilities. This is a great injustice to a man whose character was described by renowned historian Ludwell Johnson as—

“a man of great courage, rigid morals, and complete integrity; his cast of mind was logical and legalistic...”⁴⁵

Regarding Davis’ abilities, no better or more objective judgment can be attained than that of Robert E. Lee, who was the greatest General of the War Between the States and perhaps the greatest American General ever. He said:

“You can always say that a few people could have done better than Mr. Davis. I know of none that could have done as well.”⁴⁶

Davis was well-prepared to serve as Commander-in-Chief. “A West Point graduate, he had commanded regiments in the Mexican War, presided over the War Department under Pierce, and served as chairman of the Senate’s Military Committee...He quickly identified the genius of Lee at a time when others little appreciated him.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid, 145.

⁴⁶ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, XV.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *North Against South*, 157.

The armies of the Confederacy would finally capitulate piecemeal, with President Davis having little or no input in the decisions to surrender made by the commanding generals. The terms of the peace would ultimately be much harsher for the South after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Davis would become a particular target of Secretary of War Stanton and presidential successor Andrew Johnson. A reward of \$100,000 was put on the capture of Jefferson Davis, as vindictive elements in the government would accuse him of complicity in the assassination. Those who knew Davis and retained even a semblance of objectivity knew this was an outlandish accusation.⁴⁸

As Davis and his party moved West across the South, they would stay at a home in North Carolina to rest. Felicity Allen describes a scene which reflected Davis' perspective toward Lincoln.

“Next morning at breakfast, when the hosts' little girl came crying that ‘old Lincoln's coming and going to kill us all,’ it was Davis who put down his fork and, turning the child's ‘tearful face toward his own,’ said, ‘Oh, no my little lady, you need not fear that. Mr. Lincoln is not such a bad man; he does not want to kill anybody and certainly not a little girl like you.’”⁴⁹

Presidential aide Burton Harrison said of the suggestion that Davis could have been involved in the Lincoln assassination:

⁴⁸ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

“The suggestion was preposterous; no man ever carried on (war)...with less disturbance of the nicest sense of perfect rectitude...his every utterance, act and sentiment was with the strictest regard for all the moralities.”⁵⁰

Davis said the assassination of Lincoln made him “very sad.” He continued, “I considered him a kind-hearted man, and very much to be preferred by us to his successor Mr. Johnson.”⁵¹ Given the total war waged against the South, especially during the last year and a half, these are magnanimous statements indeed.

Capture and Imprisonment

Davis was captured on May 10, 1865, outside of Irwinville, Georgia. He had put on “his wife’s raincoat” while she placed her “shawl over his head” because of his poor health and inclement weather. The Yankee Calvary confronted him leaving camp at dawn. The Northern newspapers made sport of him claiming that he had been dressed in a woman’s skirt. It was not true.⁵²

This was the beginning of a terrible time of humiliation, physical deprivation, and abuse at the hands of the vindictive Yankees. He was

⁵⁰ Ibid, 20.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Canfield, *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis*, 123.

imprisoned at Fortress Monroe in Virginia for two years. His treatment was severe. He was “confined in a concrete cell with one small barred window looking out on a moat”...iron manacles were placed on his legs for a time...he was allowed no visitors or books, except the Bible for most of his imprisonment...guards were present in his cell twenty-four hours a day and ordered to make as much noise as practicable, lanterns constantly lit making sleep difficult at best.⁵³ The cell was perpetually damp and, given Davis’ chronic health problems, all of the above constituted cruel and inhumane punishment. Davis would serve as a scapegoat for all the South during the next two years.

During the *afflicting providence* of his imprisonment, he began to lean more and more on Christ. Dr. Craven, who attended the ailing Davis often during this time, said—

“The Psalms were his favorite portion of the Word and had always been...there was no affectation of devoutness”...convinced ever “more deeply” of his sincerity...“There were moments...in which Mr. Davis impressed me more than any professor of Christianity I had ever heard. There was...a clear, almost passionate grasp on his faith.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid, 125-126.

⁵⁴ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 446.

When Dr. Minnigerode, the revered southern clergyman, was finally permitted to see Jefferson Davis, he inquired as to whether or not he would like to receive communion. Davis was hesitant because of the anger and unforgiveness he had in his heart toward his captors. Dr. Minnigerode left him for a time to consider the matter. He described what occurred at his return—

“I found Mr. Davis with his mind made up. Knowing the honesty; of the man, and that there would be, could be, “no shamming’...I was delighted. Davis held out his hand and said, ‘Doctor, I am ready now. I forgive as I hope to be forgiven. As God knows my heart, I am in charity with all men.’”⁵⁵

On May 21, 1867, Jefferson Davis was released on bail of \$100,000 in a Richmond court. His bail was provided by “prominent Abolitionists.” He was never tried for treason or any other crime.⁵⁶ Indeed, the radical Republicans would see that no trial took place, for if Davis was not guilty of treason, neither was the South. In *God’s providence*, Jeff and Varina were now reunited. “On the very first day, late in the afternoon, they went to Hollywood Cemetery and laid flowers on little Joe’s grave.”⁵⁷ Their first son, Samuel, had been buried in a cemetery outside of Washington.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 451.

⁵⁶ Canfield, *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis*, 127.

⁵⁷ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 488.

No Respite for the Weary

Following Jefferson Davis' release from Fortress Monroe, he had no real means of providing for his family. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he had lost everything with the defeat of the Confederate States of America. He was literally a man without a country. In that regard, Robert E. Lee had no country or civil rights, either. "Neither Davis or Lee regained his citizenship in his own lifetime." Robert E. Lee would have his citizenship reinstated in 1976 and Davis the next year in 1977.⁵⁸

Davis and his family began a period of what might be termed *wandering* following his release from prison. Initially they would travel to Montreal, Canada because of hospitality extended by a friend. But the weather would prove too harsh for Davis' health. They would subsequently travel to London, Cuba, and New Orleans. After an extended time, they would settle in Memphis, Tennessee. He had been offered a job running an insurance company. It did not particularly suit his educational background or abilities, but he was happy to have a job that would provide the means to support his family.

God's afflicting providence would visit them again on October 16, 1872 with a terrible tragedy. Their little eleven year-old son, William, whom Jefferson called his "dear little bright boy" died of diphtheria. Writing of the loss, he said, "I am crushed under such heavy repeated

⁵⁸ Canfield, *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis*, 129.

blows; I presume not God to scan, but the many humble prayers...are hushed in the despair of my bereavement.” Little Billy had the endearing habit of “sitting silently in his father’s office...watching him work.” The loneliness and grief that would overtake Davis each day as he continued to work at a job that could not have been especially interesting to him was almost too much to bear.⁵⁹

A few years after William’s death, *God’s afflicting providence* would be felt again as Davis’ insurance company went out of business. A last ditch effort by the Board of Directors to save the company by cheating policyholders was immediately rejected by Davis, though he was losing his position as well as a substantial number of shares of stock in the company. His sense of honor and integrity would never allow such dishonest machinations.⁶⁰

The family was invited by Mrs. Sara Dorsey to live in a home she owned on the Gulf Coast in Biloxi, Mississippi. The home was called Beauvoir, which means “beautiful view.” Davis would write his extensive two-volume history of the old Confederacy while living there. *The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy* would be published in 1881. Due to its length and the cost, it would not sell well. Beauvoir would eventually be left to Jefferson Davis when Sara Dorsey died of cancer.

⁵⁹ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 510.

⁶⁰ Canfield, *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis*, 130.

God's afflicting providence dealt another overwhelming tragedy to Jefferson and Varina on October 16, 1878 when their last living son, Jeff, Jr., died of yellow jack. He had been living in Memphis when a terrible yellow fever epidemic claimed him as one of its victims. He was twenty-one.⁶¹

About this time, Davis was able to reacquire his beloved Brierfield, which had been lost during his imprisonment. It had largely reverted to the primitive state in which he had acquired it, thorns and thistles on a flood-prone peninsula on the Mississippi River. The plantation home had been ransacked and looted and had fallen into disrepair. He might have made a success of the place again, but the condition of his health limited his ability to do the things necessary to provide a profitable crop. He would never be financially well off following the War Between the States.

Jefferson Davis died on December 6, 1889. He had traveled to Brierfield, trying *to make a go of it*. The weather was inclement, and his age and health made him especially susceptible to pneumonia. His funeral in New Orleans was attended by many thousands, perhaps the largest crowd to gather for any funeral in the South.⁶² He had faced great ambivalence from the Southern people during the last two years of the war and some outright hostility. But in *God's providence* his suffering during a time of unjust and inhumane imprisonment and the virtuous and

⁶¹ Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, 545.

⁶² *Ibid*, 566.

courageous manner he lived the rest of his life would make him one-third of a noble triumvirate of Southern heroes. Today, along with Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, his image may be seen carved on the magnificent Stone Mountain monument outside of Atlanta, Georgia.

Epilogue

The Latin phrase *Res accendent lumina rebus* means *one thing throws light upon others*. The life of Jefferson Davis sheds light on a great many things, but especially upon the *providence of God*. Almost always inscrutable to finite human understanding, *God's providence* is operating in, over, and through the lives of men and of nations. This was true of Jefferson Davis' life, it was true during the short life of the Confederate States of America, and it is true of contemporary America. According to the words of the prophet, God does:

“change the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to wise men, and knowledge to men of understanding. It is He who reveals the profound and hidden things. He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with Him” (Daniel 2:21-22 NAS).

The outworking and effects of *His providence* may be known to the observer but, more often than not, His purpose and objectives are hidden

with His decrees. The immediate consequences of *God's providence* may be seen and felt, as Jefferson Davis would bear witness, but ultimate outcomes and why God does what He does may never be known in the lifetime of an individual or even during the life of a great nation.

Frank Stringfellow, a Confederate cavalryman who became an Episcopal priest after the War Between the States, wrote Davis questioning God's purpose in the outcome of the War. His struggle was the need to "harmonize" two facts: "We were right" and "God permitted our overthrow." This writer remembers a similar question put to him by another preacher, "If the South did not deserve to suffer, why did God allow it to suffer so?" This was the query of Job's friends—*surely you have done something to deserve such terrible suffering!* Davis responded to Stringfellow, "I have often times combatted the idea...that the failure of our righteous cause rendered doubtful the government of the world by an overriding *providence*." He continued in arguing both for the rightness of the Confederate cause and the reality and justice of *God's providence*. The reconciliation of these two truths may at least be grasped, if not comprehended, through the doctrine of concurrence.⁶³ All events, good and wicked, operate in *concursus*, with *providence* being the governing and preserving power of God's decretive or hidden will.

⁶³ Hodge, A.A. *Outlines of Theology*. Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press Ltd., 273-274. See End Notes for further explanation by Hodge of the doctrine of concurrence.***

Returning to Jefferson Davis, it may satisfy our human need to reconcile tragedy in a man's life with his deserving tragedy, but one cannot do that with the life of Jefferson Davis. Robert E. Lee said that "As a man," Davis was "one of the purest and noblest that could be found in the world." And Lee was not a man given to hyperbole.⁶⁴

Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Louis Dabney wrote, "It is only the atheist who adopts success as the criterion of right." This is a rebuke to the culture of success prevalent in contemporary America. It is also prescient in its anticipation of the accommodation of what passes for Christianity in our day and its unbiblical suppositions regarding the substance and effect of the blessing of God on His people. Success, i.e. God's view of success, may never be clearly understood by man. It cannot always be quantified or calculated. In the view of the world, Davis was an abject failure, and many misguided folks would suggest that he got what was coming to him, for his life had been joined to the Confederate States of America. Yet when one considers his response to God's *afflicting providence*, Davis humbly and determinably bowed to the *providence* of God in circumstances that were clearly beyond his control. It has been said that the same sun that hardens clay softens wax. God's *afflicting providence* in Davis' life drew him ever closer to God and he learned to rest in the grace found in Christ alone. Like His Lord and Savior, the cross he bore became his glory.

⁶⁴Allen, *Jefferson Davis*, XIII.

An anonymous poet wrote of the sanctifying work of God's providence:

*When God wants to drill a man, and thrill a man,
and skill a man;*

*When God wants to mold a man to play the
noblest part;*

*When He yearns with all His heart to create
so great and bold a man
that all the world shall be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!*

*How He ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
and with mighty blows converts him
into tried shapes of clay
that only God understands.
While his tortured heart is crying,
and he lifts beseeching hands.*

*How He bends but never breaks
when his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses,
and with mighty acts induces him
to try His splendor out.
God knows what He's about!*

Jefferson F. Davis was a man of exceptional gifts and abilities before the War Between the States. After the War, by the *providence of God*, he became a great man.

END NOTES

*Regarding Footnote #1

The original phrase *The Lost Cause* comes from a book of that title written by E.A. Pollard in 1866. In this work, Pollard defamed Davis, claiming the War was “lost by the perfidy of Jefferson Davis.” He cast aspersions on the character of both Jefferson Davis and his wife, and many of these accusations were quoted by subsequent authors as fact. Subsequently, the phrase Lost Cause came to refer to the loss of the Confederacy to the North. Davis was closely identified with the Lost Cause through virtually all early generations after the WBTS, though he was not always seen as the cause of the Confederacy’s loss. Over the years, the phrase has been seen as both positive and negative, specific to particulars regarding the WBTS and of late much more generally regarding the War.

** Regarding Footnote #3

“The root meaning of the word *providence* is ‘to see in advance or beforehand,’ or ‘to provide for.’ As such, the word fails to convey the deep meaning of the doctrine of providence. The doctrine signifies far more than that God is a spectator of human events. It contains far more than a mere reference to His foreknowledge. The

Westminster divines in the seventeenth century defined providence in this manner: ‘God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.’ What God creates, He also sustains. The universe is not only dependent upon God for its origin, it depends upon God for its continuity of existence. The universe can neither exist nor operate by its own power. God upholds all things by His power. It is in Him that we live, and move, and have our being. The central point of the doctrine of providence is the stress on God’s government of the universe. He rules His creation with absolute sovereignty and authority. He governs everything that comes to pass, from the greatest to the least. Nothing ever happens beyond the scope of His sovereign providential government. He makes the rain to fall and the sun to shine. He raises up kingdoms and brings them down. He numbers the hairs on our head and the days of our life.”
(R.C. Sproul)

***Regarding Footnote #63

”...the Reformed or Calvinistic theologians maintained...the doctrine of ‘Precursus,’ or of a ‘Concursus, previous and determining.’ This signified a divine energy acting upon the creature, and in every case determining it to act, and to act precisely as it does. Some applied this to such human actions as are good, others more logically applied it to all actions of every kind whatsoever.

...“The mode in which the divine agency is exerted is left entirely unexplained, but the fact that God does govern all his creatures and all their actions is expressly stated and everywhere assumed, and many of the characteristics of that government are set forth

“...The mystery of the origin and permission of moral evil we can not solve.

As to physical evil, we answer—

That it is never provided for as an end in itself, but always a means to an overbalancing good.

That in its existing relations to moral evil as corrective and punitive, it is justified alike by reason and conscience as perfectly worthy of a wise, righteous, and merciful God.

...Every moral agent in this world has more of good and less of evil than he deserves.

...Happiness and misery are much more equally distributed in this world than appears upon the surface.

...As a general rule, virtue is rewarded and vice punished even here.
...The present dispensation is a season of education, preparation, and trial, and not one of rewards and punishments.—See Ps. Lxx88.
(Archibald Alexander Hodge)

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