

President Obama: We Place Our Faith in the Nail-Scarred Hands of Jesus Christ

President Obama on Thursday spoke before people gathered at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. Here is the transcript of the president's speech:

Thank you very much. Please have a seat.

Mark, thank you for that introduction. I thought he was going to talk about my gray hair. (Laughter.) It is true that my daughters are gorgeous. (Laughter.) That's because my wife is gorgeous. (Applause.) And my goal is to improve my gene pool.

To Mark and Jeff, thank you for your wonderful work on behalf of this breakfast. To all of those who worked so hard to put this together; to the heads of state, members of Congress, and my Cabinet, religious leaders and distinguished guests. To our outstanding speaker. To all the faithful who've journeyed to our capital, Michelle and I are truly honored to be with you this morning.

Before I begin, I hope people don't mind me taking a moment of personal privilege. I want to say a quick word about a close friend of mine and yours, Joshua Dubois. Now, some of you may not know Joshua, but Joshua has been at my side – in work and in prayer – for years now. He is a young reverend, but wise in years. He's worked on my staff. He's done an outstanding job as the head of our Faith-Based office.

Every morning he sends me via email a daily meditation—a snippet of Scripture for me to reflect on. And it has meant the world to me. And despite my pleas, tomorrow will be his last day in the White House. So this morning I want to publically thank Joshua for all that he's done, and I know

that everybody joins me in wishing him all the best in his future endeavors—including getting married.

It says something about us—as a nation and as a people—that every year, for 61 years now, this great prayerful tradition has endured. It says something about us that every year, in times of triumph and in tragedy, in calm and in crisis, we come together, not as Democrats or Republicans, but as brothers and sisters, and as children of God. Every year, in the midst of all our busy and noisy lives, we set aside one morning to gather as one community, united in prayer.

We do so because we're a nation ever humbled by our history, and we're ever attentive to our imperfections—particularly the imperfections of our President. We come together because we're a people of faith. We know that faith is something that must be cultivated. Faith is not a possession. Faith is a process.

I was struck by the passage that was read earlier from the Book of Hebrews: "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and He rewards those who diligently seek Him." He rewards those who diligently seek Him—not just for one moment, or one day, but for every moment, and every day.

As Christians, we place our faith in the nail-scarred hands of Jesus Christ. But so many other Americans also know the close embrace of faith—Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Sikhs. And all Americans—whether religious or secular—have a deep and abiding faith in this nation.

Recently I had occasion to reflect on the power of faith. A few weeks ago, during the inauguration, I was blessed to place my hand on the Bibles of two great Americans, two men whose faith still echoes today. One was the Bible owned by President Abraham Lincoln, and the other, the Bible owned by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As I prepared to take the sacred oath, I thought about these two men, and I thought of how, in times of

joy and pain and uncertainty, they turned to their Bibles to seek the wisdom of God's word – and thought of how, for as long as we've been a nation, so many of our leaders, our Presidents, and our preachers, our legislators and our jurists have done the same. Each one faced their own challenges; each one finding in Scripture their own lessons from the Lord.

And as I was looking out on the crowd during the inauguration I thought of Dr. King. We often think of him standing tall in front of the endless crowds, stirring the nation's conscience with a bellowing voice and a mighty dream. But I also thought of his doubts and his fears, for those moments came as well—the lonely moments when he was left to confront the presence of long-festered injustice and undisguised hate; imagined the darkness and the doubt that must have surrounded him when he was in that Birmingham jail, and the anger that surely rose up in him the night his house was bombed with his wife and child inside, and the grief that shook him as he eulogized those four precious girls taken from this Earth as they gathered in a house of God.

And I was reminded that, yes, Dr. King was a man of audacious hope and a man of relentless optimism. But he was always—he was also a man occasionally brought to his knees in fear and in doubt and in helplessness. And in those moments, we know that he retreated alone to a quiet space so he could reflect and he could pray and he could grow his faith.

And I imagine he turned to certain verses that we now read. I imagine him reflecting on Isaiah, that we wait upon the Lord; that the Lord shall renew those who wait; that they shall mount up with wings as eagles, and they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint.

We know that in Scripture, Dr. King found strength; in the Bible, he found conviction. In the words of God, he found a truth about the dignity of man that, once realized, he never relinquished.

We know Lincoln had such moments as well. To see this country torn apart, to see his fellow citizens waging a ferocious war that pitted brother against brother, family against family—that was as heavy a burden as any President will ever have to bear.

We know Lincoln constantly met with troops and visited the wounded and honored the dead. And the toll mounted day after day, week after week. And you can see in the lines of his face the toll that the war cost him. But he did not break. Even as he buried a beloved son, he did not break. Even as he struggled to overcome melancholy, despair, grief, he did not break.

And we know that he surely found solace in Scripture; that he could acknowledge his own doubts, that he was humbled in the face of the Lord. And that, I think, allowed him to become a better leader. It's what allowed him in what may be one of the greatest speeches ever written, in his second Inaugural, to describe the Union and the Confederate soldier alike—both reading the same Bible, both prayed to the same God, but “the prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.”

In Lincoln's eyes, the power of faith was humbling, allowing us to embrace our limits in knowing God's will. And as a consequence, he was able to see God in those who vehemently opposed him.

Today, the divisions in this country are, thankfully, not as deep or destructive as when Lincoln led, but they are real. The differences in how we hope to move our nation forward are less pronounced than when King marched, but they do exist. And as we debate what is right and what is just, what is the surest way to create a more hopeful—for our children—how we're going to reduce our deficit, what kind of tax plans we're going to have, how we're going to make sure that every child is getting a great education – and, Doctor, it is very

encouraging to me that you turned out so well by your mom not letting you watch TV. I'm going to tell my daughters that when they complain. (Laughter.) In the midst of all these debates, we must keep that same humility that Dr. King and Lincoln and Washington and all our great leaders understood is at the core of true leadership.

In a democracy as big and as diverse as ours, we will encounter every opinion. And our task as citizens—whether we are leaders in government or business or spreading the word—is to spend our days with open hearts and open minds; to seek out the truth that exists in an opposing view and to find the common ground that allows for us as a nation, as a people, to take real and meaningful action. And we have to do that humbly, for no one can know the full and encompassing mind of God. And we have to do it every day, not just at a prayer breakfast.

I have to say this is now our fifth prayer breakfast and it is always just a wonderful event. But I do worry sometimes that as soon as we leave the prayer breakfast, everything we've been talking about the whole time at the prayer breakfast seems to be forgotten — on the same day of the prayer breakfast. (Laughter.) I mean, you'd like to think that the shelf life wasn't so short. (Laughter.) But I go back to the Oval Office and I start watching the cable news networks and it's like we didn't pray. (Laughter.)

And so my hope is that humility, that that carries over every day, every moment. While God may reveal His plan to us in portions, the expanse of His plan is for God, and God alone, to understand. "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known." Until that moment, until we know, and are fully known, all we can do is live our lives in a Godly way and assume that those we deal with every day, including those in an opposing party, they're groping their way, doing their best, going through the same struggles we're

going through.

And in that pursuit, we are blessed with guidance. God has told us how He wishes for us to spend our days. His Commandments are there to be followed. Jesus is there to guide us; the Holy Spirit, to help us. Love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. See in everyone, even in those with whom you disagree most vehemently, the face of God. For we are all His children.

That's what I thought of as I took the oath of office a few weeks ago and touched those Bibles—the comfort that Scripture gave Lincoln and King and so many leaders throughout our history; the verses they cherished, and how those words of God are there for us as well, waiting to be read any day that we choose. I thought about how their faith gave them the strength to meet the challenges of their time, just as our faith can give us the strength to meet the challenges of ours. And most of all, I thought about their humility, and how we don't seem to live that out the way we should, every day, even when we give lip service to it.

As President, sometimes I have to search for the words to console the inconsolable. Sometimes I search Scripture to determine how best to balance life as a President and as a husband and as a father. I often search for Scripture to figure out how I can be a better man as well as a better President. And I believe that we are united in these struggles. But I also believe that we are united in the knowledge of a redeeming Savior, whose grace is sufficient for the multitude of our sins, and whose love is never failing.

And most of all, I know that all Americans—men and women of different faiths and, yes, those of no faith that they can name—are, nevertheless, joined together in common purpose, believing in something that is bigger than ourselves, and the ideals that lie at the heart of our nation's founding – that

as a people we are bound together.

And so this morning, let us summon the common resolve that comes from our faith. Let us pray to God that we may be worthy of the many blessings He has bestowed upon our nation. Let us retain that humility not just during this hour but for every hour. And let me suggest that those of us with the most power and influence need to be the most humble. And let us promise Him and to each other, every day as the sun rises over America that it will rise over a people who are striving to make this a more perfect union.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.