

Frederick Douglass

His Life, His Faith, His Family

Theme Scriptures relevant to Douglass' Life

Example, Testimony, Justice, Honor

(Proverbs 10:7, Hebrews 12:1, Revelation 12:11, 1 Timothy 4:12, Jeremiah 22:3, Romans 13:7)

Douglass' Life

1. Born into slavery
2. Childhood
3. Escapes from slavery
4. Joins the abolitionist movement
5. Becomes most notable black abolitionist
6. American Statesman

Douglass' Faith

1. Christian slave culture
2. Conversion experience
3. Early days of ministry
4. Faith fuels mission
5. Faith as a framework

Douglass' Family

1. Broken from the start
 2. Building his own
 3. Foundation for Legacy
- ### Summary

Resources

Life and Times of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass (Biography, Benjamin Quarles)

Anna Murray Douglass, My Mother as I recall her. Rosetta Douglass

Douglass's Life

This February marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of a truly great American, Mr. Frederick Douglass. Born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in 1818, Douglass did not know his real birthday, because he was born into slavery in Talbot County, Maryland. Little Freddie would grow up into a brave young man, who with the help of his master's wife taught himself to read and write. With a thirst for knowledge and liberty, Frederick successfully escaped slavery on his third attempt in 1838.

Douglass immediately married Anna, a free black woman whom he fell in love with while still enslaved, and worked in manual labor while she kept house. Soon his remarkable story of slavery and escape caught the attention of William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist movement. He began to speak around the country urging the end of slavery and wrote the first of three autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, which remains one of the greatest books ever written in the English language.

Douglass also founded and edited his own abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*, which he ran until slavery ended. Additionally, Douglass became a friend and advisor to president Abraham Lincoln until his assassination.

After the Civil War, Douglass served four more presidents, fighting to end racial segregation and to get African Americans and women the right to vote. For his entire life, he worked tirelessly to bring justice to the oppressed and to call America to live out its highest ideals, reminding us that “The life of the nation is secure only while the nation is honest, truthful, and virtuous.”

Douglass’s Faith

How does a man born a slave to slave-masters who claim to be Christians become Christian himself?

As a child, the brutality of slavery caused Douglass to question God’s very existence. He remembers wondering:

“O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave?”

Yet, as a young man, Douglass recalls a very personal and transformative encounter with God:

“I knew very well—I was wretched, and had no means of making myself otherwise. ...I was, for weeks, a poor, broken-hearted mourner, travelling through the darkness and misery of doubts and fears. I finally found that change of heart which comes by ‘casting all one’s care’ upon God, and by having faith in Jesus Christ, as the Redeemer, Friend and Savior of those who diligently seek Him. I seemed to live in a new world, surrounded by new objects, and to be animated by new hopes and desires. I loved all mankind—slaveholders not excepted; though I abhorred slavery more than ever. My great concern was, now, to have the world converted.”

After escaping slavery, Douglass became a licensed minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Perfecting his writing and oratory skills, Douglass’s commitment to Christ and his calling fueled his new mission to abolish American slavery. With boldness and clarity, along with leading abolitionists, Frederick Douglass’s fiery denunciation of slaveholding Christianity propelled him to the forefront of the abolition movement.

“...I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of the land... I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.”

Douglass remained a student of the Bible and an ardent seeker of truth for the rest of his life. He evolved as a scholar but remained committed to the Christian faith. After his death, former Minister to Haiti E.D. Bassett said of Douglass, “He had evidently made a careful study of the Bible, and...his ever-faithful memory placed all that he read at his command.”

Douglass’s Family

Douglass never knew his father—who was white—and he was taken from his mother at birth. Of this separation, Douglass wrote:

"It has been a life-long, standing grief to me, that I know so little of my mother, and that I was so early separated from her. The counsels of her love must have been beneficial to me. The side view of her face is imaged on my memory, and I take few steps in life, without feeling her presence; but the image is mute, and I have no striking words of hers treasured up."

Despite never knowing his own parents, Douglass would prove a faithful, loving husband himself. He married Anna, who helped him escape from slavery, at about the age of 20. They had five children together, and remained married for 44 years until her death.

Although Frederick Douglass would travel extensively, he and Anna were strict about the protection and rearing of their children. According to their daughter, Rosetta, *"Mother occasionally traveled with father on his short trips, but not as often as he would have liked as she was a housekeeper who felt that her presence was necessary in the home, as she was wont to say 'to keep things straight.'"*

Douglass famously said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." The Douglass's prioritized their children's training and education, reading the Bible with them daily, and hiring tutors to educate them at home before successfully pushing to integrate their local public schools.

After Anna died in 1882, Douglass fell into a depression. He remained close to his adult children and cherished his grandchildren for the rest of his life. Eventually, he married Helen Pitts, a white seminarian and educator, and lived with her until his death in 1895.