

The Stunning Roots of America's National Day of Prayer

This Thursday is the National Day of Prayer when thousands will gather in churches, homes and other venues to pray for America. Although instituted by Congress and signed into law by President Harry Truman in 1952, the National Day of Prayer has a long and stunning history going back to the first immigrants to this land.

Jamestown – 1607

Upon their arrival off the coast of Virginia, Rev. Robert Hunt led the Jamestown settlers in three days of prayer and repentance to prepare their hearts for dedicating the land of their new home to God. When they finally disembarked on April 29, 1607, their first act was to erect a seven-foot oak cross they had brought from England. They then gathered around the cross for a prayer service in which they dedicated the land of their new home to God.

The Pilgrims and Puritans – 1600s

Before the Pilgrims departed Holland in July 1620 for the New World, they set apart an entire day to pray and ask God's blessing on their venture of faith. William Bradford said that after their pastor, John Robinson, brought an exhortation from Scripture, "The rest of the time was spent in pouring our prayers to the Lord with great fervency, mixed with abundance of tears" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 23-24).

The summer of 1623 was a long, hot summer for the Pilgrims, with no rain. As the crops began to wither and die, it looked as though hunger and even starvation could be their lot. Governor William Bradford, therefore, set aside a day for

“prayer and humiliation” to seek the Lord’s help in their time of need.

That day of prayer began like others before it, very hot and not a cloud in the sky. However, before the day was over it clouded over and began to rain—a gentle rain without wind, lightning or thunder. The Lord gave them “a gracious and speedy answer,” Bradford said, “both to their own and the Indian’s admiration that lived among them” (Hyatt, 35).

The Pilgrims, and the Puritans who followed them, often set aside special days for prayer, fasting and thanksgiving. This prayer habit became a part of the cultural experience of New England and was practiced by succeeding generations. From there, it found its way into the American culture.

Philadelphia 1741

For example, in 1741 Philadelphia became concerned about their safety since Britain was at war with Spain at the time. Although they were a British colony, there were no British soldiers to protect them from marauding Spanish ships that could well pass their way.

Benjamin Franklin, a leading citizen of the city, proposed that the Assembly and civic leaders issue a call for a day of prayer and fasting, “to implore the blessing of Heaven on our undertaking.” He wrote,

They embraced the motion; but as it was the first fast ever thought of in the province, the secretary had no precedent from which to draw the proclamation. My education in New England, where a fast is proclaimed every year, was here of some advantage. I drew it in the accustomed style, it was translated into German, printed in both languages, and divulged through the province (Hyatt, The Faith & Vision of Benjamin Franklin, 39).

Franklin and all of Pennsylvania, including government officials, thus participated in a day of prayer and fasting, imploring God's blessing and protection on their colony.

The Colonists Pray for Spiritual Awakening – 1700s

The Great Awakening that erupted in 1726 was preceded by special days set aside for prayer and fasting by both churches and regional governments. William Cooper, a pastor from New England, recalled that the churches had "set apart days, wherein to seek the Lord by prayer and fasting." In addition to the prayer of the churches, Cooper said there were "annual fast days appointed by the government" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 75).

God answered these prayers and a Great Awakening swept across Colonial America. In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin tells of the change that came over his hometown of Philadelphia when George Whitefield preached there in 1739. He wrote,

*The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was a matter of speculation to me, who was one of the number, to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 102).*

Similar reports emerged from Georgia to New England of entire communities being transformed by the Awakening. In New England, Jonathan Edwards, pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts, reported that "the entire town seemed to full of the presence of God." Prayer could be heard, not just at church, but in homes and everywhere one went in the town. A spirit of prayer seemed to be unleashed throughout

Colonial America.

The First Continental Congress Begins With Prayer – 1774

It is, therefore, no great surprise that the First Continental Congress, that met for the first time on Sept. 5, 1774, opened with an extended time of Bible reading and prayer. They began with a reading of the entire 35th psalm, which powerfully impacted everyone present.

As the psalm was read, a unique sense of God's presence filled the room and tears flowed from many eyes. John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, of the impact of the Bible reading and prayer on the delegates. He said,

Who can realize the emotions with which they turned imploringly to heaven for divine interposition and aid. It was enough to melt a heart of stone. I never saw a greater effect upon an audience. It seems as if heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read that day. I saw tears gush into the eyes of the old, grave pacific Quakers of Philadelphia. I must beg you to read that Psalm (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, 122).

The Congress and the Nation Pray

Prayer continued to be a daily part of the proceedings of the Continental Congresses. When, years later, Benjamin Franklin called the delegates of the Constitutional Convention to prayer, he reminded them, "In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible to danger, we had daily prayers in this room for Divine protection" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 144).

During the Revolutionary War, the Congress issued no less than 15 separate calls for special days of prayer and fasting. For example, during the fall of 1776, when the morale of the army and populace had sunk to an all-time low because of a poor

harvest and hardship on the battlefield, Congress proclaimed Dec. 11, 1776, as a Day of Fasting and Repentance.

Jonathan Witherspoon, a Presbyterian Reformer and member of the Congress, was deputized to write the proclamation, which was then approved by the rest of the Congress. It reads, in part,

WHEREAS, the war in which the United States are engaged with Great Britain, has not only been prolonged, but is likely to be carried to the greatest extremity; and whence it becomes all public bodies, as well as private persons, to reverence the Providence of God, and look up to him as the supreme disposer of all events, and the arbiter of the fate of nations; therefore; RESOLVED, That it be recommended to all the United States, as soon as possible, to appoint a day of solemn fasting and humiliation; to implore of Almighty God the forgiveness of the many sins prevailing among all ranks, and to beg the assistance of his Providence in the prosecution of the present just and necessary war.

There was an amazing change of circumstances after this with successes on the battlefield and the reaping of abundant harvests. There was, in fact, such a turnaround that in 1779 Congress issued a proclamation setting aside a day of thanksgiving, because "it hath pleased Almighty God, the father of mercies, remarkably to assist and support the United States of America in their important struggle for liberty."

Yes, the founding generation saw answers to their prayers. Indeed, when Franklin called the Constitutional Convention to prayer in 1787, he not only reminded them of the daily prayer during the War, but also that the prayers were answered. Addressing the Convention president, George Washington, he said, "Our prayers, sir, were heard and they were graciously answered" (Hyatt, 144).

Washington Makes Prayer a Vital Part of the Colonial Army

The Second Continental Congress, which convened on May 10, 1775, asked George Washington to become commander-in-chief of the ragtag colonial militias and to transform them into an army that could face the mighty British war machine.

Almost immediately, Washington issued an order that each day was to begin with prayer led by the officers of each unit. He also ordered that, unless their duties required them to be elsewhere, every soldier was to observe, "a punctual attendance of Divine services, to implore the blessing of heaven upon the means used for our safety and public defense."

Washington also issued an order forbidding profanity and drunkenness; and in a general letter to his troops, he said, "The General hopes and trusts that every officer and man will endeavor to live and act as becomes a Christian soldier."

That Washington himself was a devout person of prayer was confirmed by Isaac Potts, a Quaker who lived near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, when the Continental Army, led by Washington, was wintering there under much duress in 1777-78. Potts was a pacifist who opposed the war until he had a life-changing experience while riding through the woods one day during, perhaps, the bleakest period of the war. He said,

I heard a plaintive sound as of a man at prayer. I tied my horse to a sapling and went quietly into the woods and to my astonishment I saw the great George Washington on his knees alone, with his sword on one side and his cocked hat on the other. He was at Prayer to the God of the Armies, beseeching to interpose with his Divine aid, as it was ye Crisis, and the cause of the country, of humanity and of the world. Such a prayer I never heard from the lips of man. I left him alone praying. I went home and told my wife I saw a sight and heard today what I never saw or heard before, and just related to her what I had seen and heard and observed. We never thought

a man could be a soldier and a Christian, but if there is one in the world, it is Washington (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, 129).

Washington's Earnest Prayer for America

The many prayers were heard, and the unthinkable happened: The American colonists defeated the mighty British army. The war officially ended on Oct. 19, 1781 when General Cornwallis surrendered his entire force to Washington. In customary fashion, Cornwallis turned his sword over to Washington, and the weaponry of his troops was stacked in neat piles. As this occurred, the British band played, "The World Turned Upside Down." For freedom-loving people everywhere, however, the world had been turned right-side up.

Having completed his call, Washington issued a letter of resignation as commander in chief to the Continental Congress. Then, he wrote what could be described as a pastoral letter, dated June 14, 1783, to the governors of the various states. This letter included his "earnest prayer" that is here quoted in part. He wrote,

I now make it my earnest prayer that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection; that he would incline the hearts of the citizens . . . to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another . . . and to demean ourselves with that charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed religion, and without a humble imitation of His example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation (Hyatt,129).

After being sworn in as president, George Washington issued a proclamation designating Nov. 26, 1789 as a Day of Thanksgiving. The proclamation assumes the obligation of all citizens to honor God and to pray for His protection and

favor. It opened with the following statement:

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor, and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God

Prayer is American

Yes, prayer played a vital role in the founding of America. William Novak is correct when he says, "In all moments of imminent danger, as in the first Act of the First Continental Congress, the founding generation turned to prayer" (Hyatt, 120).

Seeing the vital role of prayer in the founding of this nation, let us not be intimidated by the assertion that prayer is somehow inappropriate for public or political venues. Let us be bold in our faith. Let us be salt and light in this generation. Let us pray. It is the godly thing to do! It is the American thing to do! {eo}

This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's book, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, available from Amazon and his website at . Dr. Hyatt believes this is the time for "America's Reawakening" and he has created a PowerPoint presentation with that title in which he documents America's birth out of prayer and spiritual awakening. To schedule him for your church, group or event, send an email to dreddiehyatt@.