

The Great Prayer Awakening That Ended Slavery, Saved America

In 1857, four years before the outbreak of the Civil War, a Great Prayer Awakening swept unexpectedly across America. As if drawn by an invisible force, multitudes daily gathered in churches, halls, fire stations and auditoriums to pour out their hearts to God. In major and smaller cities businesses closed for noon prayer meetings and these massive prayer gatherings became front page news stories.

As pointed out in Part 1 of this series, the First Great Awakening breached the racial chasm in Colonial America and unleashed a “moral outrage” against slavery at a time when it was practiced and accepted throughout most of the world. Now, 100 years later, this Great Prayer Awakening would release the spiritual and moral forces necessary to end slavery and preserve the nation through a devastating Civil War.

Begins with Praying for the Conversion of Sinners

This prayer awakening began when a businessman, Jeremiah Lanphier, began a noon-hour prayer meeting on Fulton Street in downtown New York City to pray for the conversion of the many new immigrants who were pouring into the city. Although it started slowly, the daily prayer gathering caught fire with hundreds attending from throughout the city and many marvelous conversions to Christ occurring.

From this Fulton Street meeting, a spirit of prayer seemed to be unleashed upon the nation. Prayer meetings began springing up in Philadelphia; Boston; Washington, D.C.; Pittsburgh; Cincinnati; Indianapolis; Chicago and in a multitude of smaller cities and rural areas.

People across the nation crowded into churches, fire stations, lodges and halls to pour out their hearts to God in prayer. It seemed that God Himself was gathering the people to prepare them for the dark and terrible night that was looming.

Charles G. Finney told of a prayer meeting in Boston in which a man stood and declared that he had just traveled almost 2,000 miles from Omaha, Nebraska, and had found “a continuous prayer meeting all the way (Hyatt, *The Great Prayer Awakening*, 22).

Finney described 1857-58 as a time when “a divine influence seemed to pervade the whole land.” He estimated that at the height of the revival 50,000 per week were being converted—and that without the aid of modern communication and technology (Hyatt, *The Great Prayer Awakening*, 26).

Conservative estimates place the total number of conversions at around 1 million, but some have suggested that as many as 2 million may have been converted. The March 1858 issue of a religious journal reported:

The large cities and towns from Maine to California are sharing in this great and glorious work. There is hardly a village or town to be found where “a special divine power” does not appear displayed (Hyatt, The Great Prayer Awakening, 26).

People Gripped by Holy Spirit Conviction

The prayer meetings were characterized by a solemn sense of God’s presence and much convicting power. Sinners seemed helpless in God’s presence as the arrows of the Almighty pierced their hearts.

For example, in a noon prayer meeting at a church in downtown Kalamazoo, Michigan, the sanctuary was crowded with a standing-room-only crowd when a prayer request was read from a

wife asking prayer for her unsaved husband.

Immediately, a man stood to his feet and with tears exclaimed, "I am that man. My wife is a good Christian woman, and she must have sent that request. Please pray for me." He sat down, and immediately, a man in another part of the house stood to his feet weeping, and as if he had not heard the first man, declared, "That was my wife who sent that request. She is a good Christian woman and I have treated her badly. Please pray for me!" He sat down and another man stood, also convinced that it was his wife who sent the prayer request and after him a fourth and a fifth with similar confessions.

Four young sailors began a prayer meeting on the battleship, the North Carolina, which was docked in New York Harbor, serving as a receiving ship for the Navy. Crewmen from different ships changed their assignment through this ship.

As the four young men prayed night after night, revival suddenly erupted as God's presence filled the ship, and powerful conviction gripped the hearts and minds of all on board. Night after night, sailors bowed humbly before the Lord and, with tears of repentance, called on His name. Hundreds were converted. Many were afterwards transferred to other ships, and revival fires were kindled wherever they went.

One writer described a "zone of heavenly influence" that pervaded the Eastern seaboard, extending out into the Atlantic and impacting the passengers and crews of approaching ships. He wrote:

Revival began aboard one ship before it reached the coast. People on board began to feel the presence of God and the sense of their own sinfulness. The Holy Spirit convicted them, and they began to pray. As the ship neared the harbor, the captain signaled, "Send a minister." Another small commercial ship arrived in port with the captain, and every member of the crew converted in the last 150 miles. Ship

after ship arrived with the same story: both passengers and crew were suddenly convicted of sin and turned to Christ before they reached the American coast (Hyatt, The Great Prayer Awakening, 25).

The Nation Is Awakened

A young D. L. Moody attended daily prayer meetings in Chicago and wrote to his mother, "Oh, how I do enjoy it! It seems as if God were here Himself." In Washington, D.C., Presidents Pierce (1853-57) and Buchanan (1857-61) attended prayer meetings organized in that city.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the black pastor of the Anson Street Presbyterian Church, a church established for slaves, began a prayer meeting in 1858. John Giardeau exhorted his congregation to pray and "wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit."

The prayer service grew until the auditorium was overflowing with more than two thousand people. As on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit suddenly fell upon those at the Anson Street Church.

They began to sob, softly, like the falling of rain; then, with deeper emotion, to weep bitterly, or to rejoice loudly, according to their circumstances. It was midnight before he could dismiss the congregation. The meeting went on night and day for weeks. Large numbers of both black and white were converted and joined churches in the city (Hyatt, The Great Prayer Awakening, 26-26).

The Prayer Revival had a profound impact on all segments of the society. It was a common sight for businesses to have signs on their doors informing customers that they were closed for the noon prayer meeting.

Newspapers carried regular reports of the revival and its

progress. The editors of the daily *New York Herald* carried a regular section called "Revival Extras" by which they informed their readers of the latest news concerning the revival.

One Chicago newspaper carried a report which shows the impact the revival was having on the society at large. It read:

So far as the effects of the present religious movement are concerned, they are apparent to all. They are to be seen in every walk of life, to be felt in every place of society. The merchant, the farmer, the mechanic—all who have been within their influence—have been incited to better things; to a more orderly and honest way of life (Hyatt, The Great Prayer Awakening, 30).

Prayer Wins the War and Saves the Union

Although this great prayer revival is often identified with the years 1857-58, it did not suddenly cease after those dates. Those dates merely identify the revival at its height and period of its greatest impact. There is evidence of its continuation and of prayer being prominent in both Northern and Southern armies.

When, for example, things were not going well for the Union army in the early days of the war, President Lincoln expressed concern that the "rebel soldiers" were praying more fervently than those of the North. The noted historian, Mark A. Noll, says, "Revivals were common in both camps of the Blue and the Gray."

Nonetheless, with the North suffering one defeat after another and things looking grim for the state of the Union, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution asking the president to proclaim a national day of fasting and prayer.

President Lincoln then designated April 30, 1863, as a national day of humiliation, prayer and the confession of

national sins, which would include the sin of slavery. The following is a selected portion of his proclamation.

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown.

But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious Hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

It behooves us then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the nation will be heard on high and answered with blessing no less than the pardon of our national sins and the restoration of our now divided and suffering country to its former happy condition of unity and peace.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed. By the President: Abraham Lincoln.

Because the Great Prayer Awakening was still fresh in the minds of the people, they responded en masse to Lincoln's call to prayer. And after this national day of repentance and prayer, there was an almost immediate turn of the war in favor

of the North—but not before one last severe test of faith.

The following June, a confident General Robert E. Lee led 76,000 Confederate troops north into Union territory, that is, into Pennsylvania. The populace was terrified and there was much panic. Lincoln, however, having been impacted by the prayer revival, found solace in prayer. He said:

“When everyone seemed panic-stricken, I went to my room and got down on my knees before Almighty God and prayed. Soon a sweet comfort crept into my soul that God Almighty had taken the whole business into His own hands.”

The Confederate forces were defeated at Gettysburg on July 3, and that battle proved to be the turning point for the war. It was also the occasion of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, one of the most significant speeches ever delivered by a national leader.

Some would say the victory at Gettysburg was coincidental, but the change came on heels of the national day of repentance, prayer and fasting. One writer surmised that the North did not win the Civil War, but that prayer won the war.

The War Ends; The Healing Continues

For all practical purposes, the War ended in the spring of 1865, when Robert E. Lee and the last major Confederate army surrendered at the Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia to Ulysses S. Grant on April 9. Over the next few months smaller units throughout the South laid down their arms and the bloodiest four years in American history came to an end.

It was from this era and out of this environment of both prayer and war that the Negro spiritual came forth that included the repeated phrase, “Ain’t gonna study war no more.” It captured the deepest feelings of many who longed for peace and a sense of God’s blessing once again on the nation.

Gonna lay down my burdens/ Down by the riverside,

Down by the riverside, down by the riverside.

Gonna lay down my burdens/ Down by the riverside.

Ain't gonna study war no more.

Gonna sit down with Jesus/ Down by the riverside,

Down by the riverside, down by the riverside.

Gonna sit down with Jesus/ Down by the riverside.

Ain't gonna study war no more. {eoa}

This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's latest book, The Great Prayer Awakening of 1857-58, available from Amazon in both paperback and Kindle. To learn more about his ministry and vision for another Great Awakening, visit his website at .