

Why We Need a Spirit of Prayer to Fall on Us Right Now

When a “spirit of prayer” comes upon a person, congregation or nation, they desire to pray more than anything else. Their hearts are overwhelmed with a yearning toward God, and nothing but prayer will suffice and satisfy. This kind of prayer is a work of the Holy Spirit and is mentioned in Romans 8:26.

This is what happened in the Great Prayer Revival of 1857-58. As if drawn by an invisible force, multitudes throughout the nation crowded into churches, fire stations, lodges and halls to pour out their hearts to God in prayer.

They did not want preaching or singing. They did not want to be entertained. They wanted to pray. Charles G. Finney said the general impression seemed to be, “We have had instruction until we are hardened; it is time for us to pray.”

This prayer revival began with a simple layman named Jeremiah Lanphier experiencing a deep concern for the unconverted and spiritually indifferent. Out of this concern, he obtained a third-story room in the Old Dutch Church on Fulton Street in downtown Manhattan and invited local businessmen to come and spend their noon hour in prayer.

Although simple in format and absent of hype, the meeting grew until every day it was standing room only. Men, women and the unconverted were drawn as if by a magnet into the prayer meeting. Marvelous answers to prayer were multiplied, and many remarkable conversions occurred.

Many pastors began attending the daily prayer meeting, and seeing the passion for prayer, began opening their churches for prayer meetings. They were amazed to see multitudes fill

their sanctuaries to pray both day and night.

A spirit of prayer seemed to be unleashed from the Fulton Street meeting to 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.

Characterized by a Solemn Sense of God's Presence

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.

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*, 24-25).*

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

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 that were organized in that city.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the black pastor of the Anson Street Presbyterian Church, John Giardeau, established a prayer meeting in 1858 and exhorted his people to "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, a congregation made up mostly of slaves.

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).

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

Conservative estimates place the total number of conversions at around one million, but some have suggested that as many as two 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).

The Third Great Awakening

This was America’s Third Great Awakening. For any revival to be called a “Great Awakening,” it should have the following three characteristics.

1. It is an obvious sovereign work of God in that it has arisen apart from any identifiable human plan, strategy or design.
2. It is nonsectarian and touches people of all sects and denominations. No one group, or church can “own” the revival.
3. It is not localized or regional but has an obvious national impact on the nation and its culture.

The Great Prayer Awakening of 1857-58 possessed these characteristics, which is why I have chosen to call it America’s “Third Great Awakening.”

The Reason for the Great Prayer Awakening

Some have suggested that the Prayer Revival of 1857-58 was an

outpouring of God's mercy preceding national judgment for the institutional sin of slavery—that it was God giving the nation an opportunity to deal with this sin and thereby avoid the coming judgment.

Others would emphasize that the revival was God's way of strengthening and preparing the nation for the terrible time of suffering it would endure through the Civil War. In their excellent book, *Firefall: How God Has Shaped History Through Revivals*, McDow and Reid write,

The Prayer Revival laid the foundation to give spiritual resources that would help the nation survive this conflict. Roy Fish notes that one of the major functions of the great awakening of 1858 had to do with its preparation of the country for its fratricidal war which clouded the horizon" (Hyatt, The Great Prayer Awakening, 34-35).

Giardeau, the black pastor from South Carolina, believed the revival was sent to prepare the hearts of so many who would soon lose their lives in the Civil War. He described the revival as "the Lord's mercy in gathering His elect for the great war that was soon to sweep so many of them into eternity."

The Greatest Tragedy in American History

There was, indeed, great loss on all fronts, but none so great as the loss of human life. Estimates of the loss of life range from 625,000 to over 700,000 soldiers and an unknown number of civilians. The magnitude of the loss is amplified by the fact that the United States population at the time was only 31 million.

By way of comparison, in WWII, 50,000 American soldiers lost their lives. In the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, less than 10,000 Americans have died. More lives were lost in the Civil War than in all wars combined from the American

Revolution through the Korean Conflict.

It was truly a devastating time. Weeping could be heard in homes throughout America. In many homes, both father and sons were missing. Hardly a family could be found that had not lost multiple family members.

The nation was devastated only a few years after the Great Prayer Revival. However, there is evidence that the spirit of prayer continued during the war and, no doubt, preserved the populace and the nation from utter ruin.

Prayer Continues During the War

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 are reports of prayer meetings being prominent in both the Northern and Southern armies—a carry-over from the Prayer Revival.

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” (Hyatt, *The Great Prayer Awakening*, 35).

A National Day of Prayer Changes the Course of the War

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. In this proclamation, he said:

It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon, and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history: that those nations only are blessed whose God is Lord.

Lincoln's Prayer of Faith

Because the influence of 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 a 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 (Hyatt, *The Great Prayer Awakening*, 38).

The Confederate forces were defeated at Gettysburg on July 3, and that battle proved to be the turning point for the war. 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 the sufferings of 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 burden/ 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.

If My People Will Humble Themselves and Pray

America is once again deeply divided and there is no answer to be found in politics, education or formal religion. There is, however, an answer and the Great Prayer Awakening of 1857-58 points us to that answer. The answer is a serious meeting with God in prayer.

A national healing will occur when God's people meet, not in Washington D.C, but in 2 Chronicles 7:14. This is a promise of national healing with certain conditions attached—conditions related to prayer.

We can be encouraged that Vice President Mike Pence often quoted this passage during the 2016 presidential campaign as a basis for national healing. When he took the oath of office, he purposely placed his hand on a Bible opened to this

passage. The New International Version reads: “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and heal their land.” {eoa}

This article was derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt’s latest book, The Great Prayer Awakening of 1857-58, available from Amazon in both kindle and paperback. To read more about his vision for America and the world, visit his website at .