

# Why Did the Fire Fall in 1857?

by David Smithers

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*The 1857 revival was a miraculous move of prayer that spread across the United States, leading to widespread conversions and a renewed sense of moral health and purpose.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 65:2, Acts 1:14, Ephesians 6:18, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, James 5:16

**Topics:** "Prayer Meetings", "Spiritual Revival"

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## Description

David Smithers preaches about the powerful impact of continuous prayer during the 1857 awakening in the United States, where noonday prayer meetings spread rapidly across the country, leading to miraculous conversions and a great thirst for God. The revival was marked by daily united prayer meetings, resulting in conversions across all ages and classes, even reaching the most unlikely individuals. The divine fire of revival also extended to the sea, with ships experiencing sudden convictions and conversions, spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth.

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## Transcript

### Two Thousand Miles of Prayer

The climax of the awakening came in 1857. Noonday prayer meetings were started in New York, Philadelphia and other cities. Then the movement spread with lightning-like speed throughout the land. In Philadelphia it is said that three thousand people attended the noonday prayer meetings, and in Chicago some two thousand were in attendance day by day. In one of Mr. Finney's meetings in Boston a man arose and said: I am from Omaha, in Nebraska. On my journey East I have found a continuous prayer meeting all the way. We call it two thousand miles from Omaha to Boston; and here was a prayer meeting about two thousand miles in extent." The entire country was stirred by these noonday prayer meetings.

Rev. John Shearer in his book on "Old Time Revivals" said: "In answer to the Church's united cry, ascending from all parts of the land, the Spirit of God in a very quiet way, and suddenly, throughout the whole extent of the United States, renewed the Church's life, and awakened in the community around it a great thirst for God. When the Church awoke to the full consciousness of the miracle, it found that from east and west, and from north and south, the whole land was alive with daily prayer meetings. And it was in these daily united prayer meetings that the great majority of these conversions, of all ages and classes, took place. The divine fire appeared in the most unlikely quarters. A large number of the elderly were converted and gathered in. White-haired penitents knelt with little children at the Throne of Grace. Whole families of Jews were brought to their Messiah. Deaf mutes were reached by the glad tidings, and though

their tongues were still, their faces so shone that they became effective messengers of the gospel. The most hardened infidels were melted, some being led to Christ by the hand of a little child."

### Continuous Prayer

C. H. Spurgeon commenting on this great move of the Spirit said: "In the City of New York at this present moment, there is not, I believe one single hour of the day where Christians are not gathered together for prayer. One church opens its doors from 5 o'clock till six for prayer; another church opens from six to seven and summons its praying men to offer the sacrifice of supplication. Six o'clock is past, and men are gone to their labor. Another class find it then convenient - such as those, perhaps, who go to business at eight or nine - and from seven to eight there is another prayer meeting. From eight to nine there is another, in another part of the city, and what is most marvelous, at high noon, from twelve to one, in the midst of the city of New York, there is held a prayer meeting in a large room, which is crammed to the doors every day, with hundreds standing outside. This prayer meeting is made up of merchants of the city, who can spare a quarter of an hour to go in and say word of prayer and then leave again; and then a fresh company come in to fill up the ranks, so that it is supposed that many hundreds assemble in that one place for prayer during the appointed hour. This is the explanation of the revival!"

### Prayer: A Divine Attraction

Samuel Prime in his book "The Power of Prayer" described the effects the revival had upon New York City, "The prayer-meeting became one of the institutions of the city. Christians in distant parts of the country heard of them. They prayed for the prayer-meetings. When they visited the city, the prayer-meeting was the place to which they resorted. The museum or theatre had no such attractions. Returning, they set up similar meetings at home. The Spirit followed, and the same displays of grace were seen in other cities, and in the country, that were so marvelous in New York. So the work spread, until the year has become remarkable in the history of the Church. This revival is to be remembered through all coming ages as simply an answer to prayer."

### Prayer At Sea

"Nor was the blessing confined to the land. The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water, and a multitude of seamen saw a great light. It was as if a vast cloud of blessing hovered over the land and sea. And ships, as they drew near the American ports, came within the zone of heavenly influence. Ship after ship arrived with the same tale of sudden conviction and conversion. It was wonderful beyond words! In one ship a captain and the entire crew of thirty men found Christ out at sea and entered the harbor rejoicing.

The North Carolina - a battleship of the United States Navy - lay in the harbor of New York. Her complement was about a thousand men. Amongst these were four Christians who discovered their spiritual kinship and agreed to meet for prayer. They were permitted to use a very retired part of the ship, on a deck far below the water line. Here, then, they gathered one evening. They were only four men, but they were a united band. They represented three denominations, one being an Episcopalian, another a Presbyterian, while two were Baptists. As they knelt in the dim light of a tiny lamp, the Spirit of God suddenly filled their hearts with such joy of salvation that they burst into song. The strange sweet strain rose to the decks above, and there created great astonishment. Their ungodly shipmates came running down. They came to mock, but the mighty power of God had been liberated by rejoicing faith. It gripped them, and in one moment their derisive laugh was changed into the cry of penitent sinners! Great fellows,

giants in stature, and many of them giants in sin, were literally smitten down, and knelt humbly beside the four, like little children.

A most gracious work straightway began in the depths of the great ship. Night after night the prayer meeting was held, and conversions took place daily. Soon they had to send ashore for help, and ministers joyfully came out to assist. A large number were added to the various churches, and the battleship became a veritable House of God! The North Carolina was a receiving ship, from which men were constantly drafted to other ships. The converts of the revival were scattered throughout the navy. A revival convert is a burning brand. The holy fire spread rapidly from ship to ship. Wherever the converts went they started a prayer meeting and became a soul-winning band. Thus ship after ship left the harbor of New York for foreign seas, each carrying its band of rejoicing converts, and the fire of God was borne to the ends of the earth."

### Why Did They Pray?

Again we quote from Samuel Prime's book "The Power of Prayer", he explains to some extent the motivation behind such a miraculous move of prayer. He wrote, "As a nation, we were becoming rapidly demoralized by our worldliness, our ambition, our vanity, and our vices. The true, the great end for which, we believe, this nation was raised up, was being lost sight of. The very foundations were moving. We needed this 'great awakening' to bring us to our senses, to rouse up the national conscience, to arrest the national decay, and bring us back to a high tone of moral health. Nothing but the influence of a deep and all-pervading earnest piety can save this nation from the fate of all past republics. The tide of corruption must be rolled backward. This was felt; everywhere felt. The place of prayer was the place to get the help we needed. Men rushed to the place of prayer with high resolves, and with weighty demands to ask great things of God. And men rejoiced with unbounded joy when they saw what God was doing. Why should not a holy enthusiasm be enkindled? It was kindled, and God be praised."

### The Challenge

"Brethren, we must pray as we have never yet prayed. Our want of success is due to our coldness of desire and slothfulness of request. We are not straitened in God, but in our own low, slender conceptions and hopes. We have not, because we ask not. If we were under a deep and solemn impression of the divine power, bounty, and faithfulness, 'how should one chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight!' The lesson which the revival should teach us is the duty of being instant in supplication for the larger and more glorious effusion of the Holy Spirit. Acting on this, we shall behold new marvels of love in the place of prayer."

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