

"Prayer: America's Hope" (Psalm 33:22) National Day of Prayer, May 7, 2009

What can happen when a nation turns to God in prayer? And what can happen when a nation slacks off in prayer? I've got a great example that answers both questions. And it's not just one that goes back to Bible times. It's very contemporary. In fact, it's one where members of my own family have been involved. I'm talking about East Germany – what happened in East Germany before and after the fall of communism.

As you know, before the fall East Germany was ruled by folks who did their best to inject atheism into every segment of society – not just into politics, but into work, school, sports, social events; they even came up with atheist alternatives for Baptism and Confirmation. In 1981, the communist system seemed to be humming along nicely. In Leipzig especially, party loyalty was strong. So when Pastor Christian Führer began a Monday evening prayer service at Leipzig's Nikolai church, there was little reason for hope. Actually, only one reason – the one in our text: **"O Lord...we hope in You."** At first, as you can well imagine, very few people dared to come out for the prayer service. But there were a few, and these few devoted themselves to prayer – prayer for their city, prayer for their nation, prayer for freedom. Did they ever feel like giving up? Probably. Things got worse before they got better. But little by little, more people joined in. Soon three nearby churches started holding Monday evening prayer services of their own. In time, they even got up the courage to end their services with a joint candlelight walk around the city. Then even more churches started doing this, churches throughout the land. The prayer movement really snowballed! By 1989, attendance in Leipzig alone reached the tens of thousands. The tipping point came October 9th of that year. Incensed by these after-service prayer walks, the communist authorities decided to play hardball. They sent in the military with orders to shoot. Seventy thousand people showed up anyway. Amazingly, not a single shot was fired. Well, the next week 120,000 came. The next week 500,000. And the result? Soon the Berlin wall fell, then the communist government itself. Now, there were many factors behind all this. But back then, most people credited the Monday evening prayer services. In fact, a banner even went up in the Leipzig city center: *"Wir danken Dir, Kirche!"* "We thank you, church!"

Of course, the real "thank you" should go to God! And I know those hardy intercessors do give Him the credit. They have all along: **"O Lord...we hope in You."** But what an example they have given us! What a model for believers here! What an encouragement to turn to God in prayer no matter what! And I emphasize: no matter what! For when we look at the state of our nation, the world situation, the problems in our own community, there's a lot that's pretty discouraging. To some, these challenges may even seem unsolvable. But are any of these challenges bigger than God? Are any of them beyond His wisdom and power? Do we not believe in an almighty God, a sovereign God, a God who is able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine? And more to

the point, do we not believe in a God who has promised, **“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land”**? That is God’s promise! So why would we be content to just lament the situation, to just moan and groan about the problems we face? There is a better alternative: **“O Lord...we hope in You.”** However bleak the situation may seem, **“We hope in You.”** However complex our problems, **“We hope in You.”** However entrenched the godlessness, **“We hope in You.”** We don’t need additional reasons for hope. God is enough. God is more than enough. What we need is to turn to God, depend on God, draw power from God. And we need to do that specifically through prayer. For what happened in East Germany was not a fluke. It shows what can happen anywhere when believers take God seriously – that is, when believers get on their knees, stay on their knees, claim God’s promises, no matter what, and expect God to act. Yes, it can happen anywhere. It can happen here. But what’s needed are hardy intercessors – people like you and me – who are willing to look beyond worldly reasons for hope and lift our focus higher: **“O Lord...we hope in You.”**

And that is why we are here tonight, isn’t it? That is why we are observing this National Day of Prayer. Because we believe that turning to God is our nation’s best and brightest hope. As we gather here, we know this one day is not much in itself. We know it’s really more a symbol. What’s needed is for every day to be a national day of prayer – every day, not just in times of trouble. Up until now, that’s been the norm in this country. Prayer in times of trouble. Right after 9/11, for instance, people were good about turning to God and coming together in prayer. But how long did it last? What’s needed is more than that. What’s needed is genuine turning to God, trusting in God, depending on God over the long haul...and making these words the norm: **“O Lord...we hope in You.”** Only then will prayer truly be America’s hope.

For here again, let’s look at what happened in East Germany – this time, what happened after the fall of communism. Twenty years have passed. Twenty years of freedom. And what has happened during these twenty years? Sad to say, the passion for prayer has really died down; the attitude of gratitude is gone. I even see it in my own family. Under the communists, they stubbornly stood their ground – attending worship each Sunday, sacrificing to give financial support, suffering the slights and hardships that Christians had to endure. In fact, they were among those who came out for Monday evening prayer services in their own town and joined in the candlelight walks. But now that those prayers have been answered, what’s happened since? Now that they live in freedom, what’s their commitment like? Well, let’s just say they’ve slacked off. Slacked off quite a bit. And that’s true all over. Especially in prayer. Is it because there are no problems anymore? Hardly! Neo-Nazi groups are popping up here and there. Families are breaking down. Violent crimes are on the rise. Drugs and the problems that go with them are getting worse and worse. Why, even the old communists are making a resurgence. Imagine that! And, of course, people

deplore the situation. They moan and groan about how bad things have gotten. But do they remember what made the difference twenty years ago? Does it occur to them to devote themselves to prayer? Especially now that they're free to do so? Sadly, that's not the case. Even at the Nikolai church in Leipzig, where the Monday evening prayer services began, the passion for prayer has definitely died down. Yes, the services are still held, and people do still come, but subtract the tourists, and the number of hardy intercessors is pretty much what it was when they started. Twenty years ago, what happened there was so encouraging! It showed what we can expect from prayer! What's happened since is more of a cautionary tale – showing the need to persevere in prayer.

So these are two points we want to take home with us tonight. First, of course, is the need to devote ourselves to prayer with a spirit of expectation. What God has promised, He will do. What God has done elsewhere, He can do here. Our job is not to figure out how God will intervene in this land of ours. Our job is not to figure out how God will work to solve the problems we face. The how, when, and where – that's up to God. Our job is to pray. Frequently, faithfully, fervently pray: for those in authority, for those with special needs, for those who wield influence, for vulnerable populations, for our families, for our congregations, for religious institutions throughout the land. Our job is to pray no matter what – trusting that for God nothing is impossible; confident that God is able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine; and expecting that God will answer our prayers. Yes, we need to pray with a spirit of expectation.

And even more, we need to pray with perseverance. Right now, I suspect a lot more people feel a lot more motivated to spend a lot more time in prayer, because there are a lot more problems facing our nation. But when these prayers are answered – notice I say “when” not “if” – when these prayers are answered, what will happen next? For many folks, that's when motivation dries up. When they've gotten what they prayed for, it's tempting to slack off. Ironic, isn't it? God answers their prayers, so they stop praying! For us, it needs to work just the opposite. In bad times and in good times, we need to keep on keeping on. In sad times and in happy times, we need to keep lifting our focus higher. In tough times, and especially when things seem to be going better, we need to pray with perseverance: **“O Lord...we hope in You.”**

After all, just because things seem to be going “better” doesn't mean they will continue that way. Nor does it mean other things won't get worse. The truth is: we will never be rid of troubles. We will never outgrow our need for God's help. If it's not one thing, it'll be another, and wise people realize this. In fact, wise people see it most clearly...and pray accordingly.

Case in point: a while back I read an article about the Monday evening prayer services at St. Nikolai. Among the people interviewed was an elderly woman who had risked joining in when they first started and who still faithfully attends them today. The reporter asked her how she felt about the dramatic drop in

attendance...and why she kept coming. The woman answered, "Why would I stop coming? We still have plenty of problems today – different ones, but ones that are just as destructive to the human soul and seem just as impossible to solve. God is still our only hope – that has not changed! – and prayer is still essential. That's why I keep coming. You see, I believe that with God nothing is impossible. I know that from experience. So not only do I pray for God's help, I pray for the day when our whole nation will turn again to God for help. And I look forward to seeing that day – when another prayer movement will lead to the healing of our nation; a day, in fact, when we will see such answers to prayer that again a banner will be hung in our city center that says, '*Wir danken Dir, Kirche!*' ['We thank you, church!'] I look forward to seeing that! And in the meantime, I just keep praying."

Talk about expectation! And perseverance! Now, that's a hardy intercessor! And what a role model for you and me! At Thanksgiving, it's often said that every day should be thanksgiving day – which is true enough. And can't the same be said for the National Day of Prayer? Every day should be a national day of prayer. It doesn't have to be official. Regardless of what others do, we can make that commitment ourselves. Each day, we can pray for our world, for our nation, for our community. Each day, we can pray for freedom from the many troubles that plague us, and power to "**do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.**" We, too, can be hardy intercessors. We need to be – ones who pray with expectation and perseverance: "**O Lord...we hope in You.**"

So let us make this our "homework" as we observe our National Day of Prayer. In our own lives, at least, let us make this the first of 365 national days of prayer. Leonard Ravenhill is often quoted as saying, "*Failing in prayer, we fail everywhere.*" But you know, the opposite is also true. Faithfulness in prayer can make a difference everywhere. That is God's promise. That is our calling. That is America's best and brightest hope. "**O Lord...we hope in You.**" Amen.