



# The Decline Of Nations

*by Fred Hanko*

Scattered about on nearly every continent on the surface of the earth lie the remains of ancient civilizations; the mighty winged bulls of Assyria buried beneath the shifting desert sands, the splendor of the Hanging Gardens reduced to a pile of dirt and stone, the Parthenon and the Coliseum empty except for the voices of the tourists. The ancient civilizations which were the wonder and the terror of their times must be patiently excavated by archeologists who attempt to piece together their secrets and rebuild them in the minds of men today.

Even among us today there are several nations that retain only remnants of former greatness. Spain, once the wealthiest and strongest of nations, is hardly noticed in world affairs. England, upon whose empire the sun never set, admitted just a few years ago that it is now only a second-rate power. France looks back on the glories of Napoleonic days. The lists of nations that have risen, shone with great splendor for a brief time, and then declined into obscurity could go on and on. This is probably the simplest and most predictable pattern of history.

One of the most pressing problems of the historian is to answer the question why. Why does a nation whose power exceeds all others and whose glory is the admiration of all people fall? Would it not seem a simple thing to ascertain those qualities that contributed to its rise and to its high position and to retain them? These questions are particularly relevant today when we wonder about the future of our own nation, and when we teach our children to interpret the signs of the times.

In an attempt to answer these questions it is important to remember that history does not interpret itself. However

painstakingly the archeologist may piece together its bits of ancient pottery or however neat the dialectic of Hegel or Marx may appear to be, the answers to history do not come from history itself. Happily, we have a guide to the interpretation of history in the Scriptures. The Old Testament prophets, inspired by the infallible Holy Spirit, were the greatest news commentators and analysts the world has ever known. Guided by their inerrant instruction, we can learn a great deal about the fall of the ancient civilizations and by comparison a great deal about the decline and fall of nations of more recent times.

We find, first of all, from a study of the Scripture, that God raises up nations to serve a particular purpose, and when that purpose is served, He causes them to fade away. Thus Assyria was used by God to take the Kingdom of Judah, the Persians to return the Jews to their homeland. A nation, then, can fall and certainly will fall when it has served the purpose for which God has raised it up.

But it is certainly not enough to say that nations decline because they have served God's purpose. While this is certainly true, no nation at that point simply bursts like a bubble for unaccountable reasons. God also causes them to fall for specific reasons so that they may be lessons for us and may aid us in the understanding and interpretation of our own times.

The basic reason for the failure of every nation is, of course, sin. All human institutions fall because of corruption of the builders. The fundamental wickedness of man is the flaw that lies in the foundation of his building that causes it eventually to fall of its own weight.

This fatal flaw of man that brings about the fall of his great nations is clearly pride. The building of the Tower of Babel already displayed this evil. "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make a name...." The reason for the fall of mighty Assyria is given in Isaiah 10:12 and 13: "I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom..." (see also the prophecy of Nahum, Ezekiel 31, and Zephaniah 2:13-15). God spoke these words against mighty Babylon through the mouth of Jeremiah: "...recompense her according to her work; according to all that she hath done, do unto her; for she hath been proud against the Lord, against the Holy One of Israel." (Jeremiah 50:29b, see also Isaiah 13 and 47). That this same evil undermines the nations of the modern world we find in

Revelation 18 which speaks of the fall of modern "Babylon": "How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her; for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow."

The primary manifestation of pride is idolatry. According to Romans 10 all those who are guilty of the sin of pride are idolators. Pride and idolatry are therefore linked repeatedly by the prophets as the causes for destruction of nations.

Although pride brings about the fall of nations, there are so many ways in which pride manifests itself that it is very difficult often to demonstrate this fact in the history of a particular nation. There are, however, several striking examples in history of obvious national pride and a dramatic punishment by God for that pride. It certainly must have been pride that moved Philip II to send the Invincible Armada against England. In the factors that defeated the Armada: the design of the Spanish ships, the ferocity of the defense by the English, and particularly the great storm that destroyed so much of the Spanish fleet, we can point out the clear hand of God upon the Spanish nation. Clearly, it was also personal and national pride which drove Napoleon and the French people as well as Hitler and the Germans to their catastrophic defeats.

National pride manifests itself in so many ways that we can list a large number of these manifestations as contributing causes of the decline and fall of nations. It should not be forgotten that these are all manifestations of the sin of pride and therefore forms of idolatry. Without classification of relative importance, these are some of the "contributing causes" or symptoms that indicate the presence of the fatal disease.

The failure to use properly the treasures and the national resources of a nation will cause it to decline. The vast treasures that Spain brought back from the new world disappeared in the fleeting pleasures and luxuries of the rich as a large part sank to the bottom of the sea with the Armada.

Exploitation of other people also exhibits pride and leads to the decline of nations. The best illustration to this is the results of colonialism. Spain, France, England, and the Netherlands still suffer the effects of their exploitation of other lands during the last few centuries.

The breakup of the family is certainly an important factor in the breaking of nations. This is traceable as an important factor in the decline of Rome as well as many other nations. Breakup of the family leads inevitably to the disregard of authority and the

eventual dissolution of the state.

The improper exercise of authority by the government is another certain way to destroy the nation. The improper exercise of authority may be in the abdication of authority by the distractions of personal interests or the fear of exercising it, or authority may be improperly exercised by causing it to interfere in areas that are not the legitimate concern of the government. Examples of the improper exercise of authority abound from the times that the prophets bemoaned the laxity of the kings of Israel and Judah to the over-extension of authority in the totalitarian states of more recent history.

The decay of moral behavior on the part of the citizens of a country is a symptom of the decline of a nation, a contributing cause of its decline, and a certain factor that will bring upon that nation the judgment of God.

All of these factors are so inextricably linked in the decline and fall of any nation that it is impossible to say that any particular one is the primary cause. Nor is it possible to say that any one of these factors will more quickly or certainly bring down the judgment of God than any other. It is, however, most important to point them out as they develop in a nation and to show the certain results of these evils.

We should recognize, though, that all of the secondary factors named (and we could certainly list more factors) are all rooted in the one primary cause, pride. If history teaches any lesson at all, it is that God will certainly punish the sin in individuals and nations. The sin of pride will result in the misuse of authority that God has given to the government, and so include a breakdown of authority in the home and a collapse of morality. God only rarely causes destruction in a moment as with Sodom and Gomorrah. More commonly God causes them to decay gradually so that other nations bring upon them the destruction they deserve.

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