

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON
**CIVILIZATION
DECLINE**



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CIVILIZATION DECLINE



Image: Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty Images

One of the booklets in this series explains how worldviews have changed through history. This look at history from Rome to the present raises an important question about why nations and civilizations rise and fall. Obviously, whole books and even book series have been written to answer this question. Here are a few key principles.

Importance of History

To answer the question of civilization decline, we must study history. But that is the first problem. Historians come to different conclusions about why certain events take place and what led to the decline and fall of a nation or civilization. Economic challenges are certainly important, and Marxist historians often view all of history through an economic lens. Social decline and political turmoil also can explain a nation's decline. There are also spiritual issues. Christian historians are more likely to appreciate these forces that secular historians might ignore.

Another problem is that even if we study history, we don't seem to learn from history. George Santayana lamented that, "those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it." The philosopher Hegel said, "What experience and history teach us is this: that people and governments never have

learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced from it." Or as Winston Churchill said, "The one thing we have learned from history is that we don't learn from history."

History has shown that the average age of the great civilizations is around two hundred years. Countries like Great Britain exceed the average while other countries like the United States are just now reaching the average age.

Each of the great civilizations in the world passed through a series of stages from their birth to their decline to their death. Historians and social commentators have noticed some similar patterns in civilization decline. Here is one list of ten stages put together centuries ago.

The first stage moves from bondage to spiritual faith. The second stage changes from spiritual faith to great courage. The third stage moves from great courage to liberty. The

fourth stage moves from liberty to abundance. The fifth stage changes from abundance to selfishness. The sixth stage moves from selfishness to complacency. The seventh stage moves from complacency to apathy. The eighth stage moves from apathy to moral decay. The ninth stage moves from moral decay to dependence. And the tenth and last stage moves from dependence to bondage.

These are some of the stages through which great civilizations have gone. Notice the progression from bondage to liberty back to bondage. The first generation throws off the shackles of bondage only to have a later generation, through apathy and indifference, allow itself to once again be enslaved.

Family Decline

Historians have noticed a correlation between family decline and nation decline. If the family is strong, usually the nation is strong. If the

family falls apart, often the nation is headed for decline. As families go, so goes a nation.

This has been the main premise of thinkers from British historian J. D. Unwin to Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin who have studied civilizations that have collapsed. One Christian book that discusses this is *Our Dance Has Turned to Death* by Carl Wilson. He identifies the common pattern of family decline in ancient Greece and the Roman Empire.

In the first stage, men ceased to lead their families in worship. Spiritual and moral development became secondary. Their view of God became naturalistic, mathematical, and mechanical.

In the second stage, men selfishly neglected care of their wives and children to pursue material wealth, political and military power, and cultural development. Material values began to dominate thought, and the

men began to exalt their own roles as individuals.

The third stage involved a change in men's sexual values. Men who were preoccupied with business or war either neglected their wives sexually or became involved with lower-class women or with homosexuality. Ultimately, a double standard of morality developed.

The fourth stage affected women. The role of women at home and with children lost value and status. Women were neglected and their roles devalued. Soon they revolted to gain access to material wealth and also freedom for sex outside marriage. Women also began to minimize having sex relations to conceive children, and the emphasis became sex for pleasure. Marriage laws were changed to make divorce easy.

In the fifth stage, husbands and wives competed against each other for money, home leadership, and

the affection of their children. This resulted in hostility and frustration and possible homosexuality in the children. Many marriages ended in separation and divorce.

Many children were unwanted, aborted, abandoned, molested, and undisciplined. The more undisciplined children became, the more social pressure there was not to have children. The breakdown of the home produced anarchy.

In the sixth stage, selfish individualism grew and carried over into society, fragmenting it into smaller and smaller group loyalties. The nation was thus weakened by internal conflict. The decrease in the birthrate produced an older population that had less ability to defend itself and less will to do so, making the nation more vulnerable to its enemies.

Finally, unbelief in God became more complete, parental authority diminished, and ethical and moral

principles disappeared, affecting the economy and government. Thus, by internal weakness and fragmentation the societies came apart. There was no way to save them except by a dictator who arose from within or by barbarians who invaded from without.

Although this is an ancient pattern of decline found in Greece and Rome, it is relevant today. Families are the foundation of a nation. When the family crumbles, the nation falls because nations are built upon family units. They are the true driving social force. A nation will not be strong unless the family is strong. That was true in the ancient world and it is true today.

Social commentator Michael Novak, writing on the importance of the family, concluded, "One unforgettable law has been learned through all the disasters and injustices of the last thousand years: If things go well with the family, life is worth living; when the family falters, life falls apart."

Spiritual Decline

There is also an important spiritual factor in civilization decline. Often nations fall due to internal factors rather than external threats. Even though some may have fallen to barbarians, their demise ultimately came because of moral and spiritual weakness that manifested itself as military weakness.

In the opening chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he traces a similar progression. In fact, Romans 1 shows the decline of a civilization from a societal perspective. Looking at the Hellenistic world of his time, he reflects on the progression of sin in a nation.

The first stage is when people turn from God to idolatry. Although God has revealed Himself in nature to all men so that they are without excuse, they nevertheless worship the creation instead of the Creator. This is idolatry. In the past, this took the form of actual idol worship. In our

day, it takes the form of the worship of money or the worship of self. In either case, it is idolatry. A further example of this is a general lack of thankfulness. Although they have been prospered by God, they are ungrateful. And when they are no longer looking to God for wisdom and guidance, they become vain and futile and empty in their imaginations. They no longer honor God, so their foolish hearts become darkened. In professing to be wise, they have become fools.

The second stage is when men and women exchange their natural use of sex for unnatural uses. Here the Apostle Paul says those four sobering words, "God gave them over." In a society where lust-driven sensuality and sexual perversion dominate, God gives them over to their degrading passions and unnatural desires.

The third stage is anarchy. Once a society has rejected God's revelation, it is on its own. Moral and social anar-

chy is the natural result. At this point God has given the sinners over to a depraved mind and so they do things that are not proper. This results in a society that is without understanding, is untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful.

The final stage is judgment. God's judgment rightly falls upon those who practice idolatry and immorality. Certainly an eternal judgment awaits those who are guilty, but a social judgment occurs when God gives a nation over to its sinful practices.

Notice that this progression is not unique to the Hellenistic world the Apostle Paul was living in. The progression from idolatry to sexual perversion to anarchy to judgment is found throughout history. This progression happened to Greece, to Persia, to Babylon, and to Rome. If it happened to these nations, then it can happen today. Unless we return to God's principles, decline is inevitable.

Additional Resources

Jim Nelson Black, *When Nations Die: Ten Warning Signs of a Culture in Crisis*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1994.

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Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age*, New York: Dutton, 1941.

J.D. Unwin, *Sex and Culture*, London: Oxford University Press, 1934.

Carl Wilson, *Our Dance Has Turned to Death: But We Can Renew the Family and Nation*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981.

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