

What Makes A Nation Great?

Introduction. There has never been a nation like America. If one could have seen the engineering of Egypt, the splendor of Rome, the commerce of Phoenicia, the culture of Greece, the mysteries of Asia, the dignity of England, and the beauty of South America, he would still have come away convinced that America excelled them all.

Even at this hour, thousands await visas to leave homelands to sail or fly to America. They will leave behind all that is familiar to begin again in the land of the free, the home of the brave. America is the greatest collection of laws, land, liberty, people, and passion ever seen on the planet. Truly God has shed His grace here.

A case could be made for any of these, and a stronger one for all of these, but it is actually none of these. If military power made a nation great, Assyria would never have fallen. If organization and engineering did, Rome would still be a world power. If scientific education did, Nazi Germany would have ruled the world. If a far-flung empire did, Britain would be the greatest ever. If vast natural resources did, the Soviet Union would not have broken apart. If money did, Saudi Arabia would be greater than America.

What makes a nation great? In a word — righteousness (Proverbs 14:34). America is what it is because it has managed to stay in the good favor of the Creator. Daniel said that God changes the political times and seasons (Daniel 4:17, 37).

I. Principle: Blessed Is The Nation Whose God Is The Lord

- A. God has no nation with a combined civil and religious state now, but there are internal spiritual forces that lift a nation. Conversely, we can identify the characteristics that lead to downfall. Since human nature and God's standards do not change, similar settings produce similar events.
- B. While some today gloss over America's godly heritage, to do so is simply revisionist history. No one even passingly familiar with the Founding Fathers would venture that they were New Testament Christians, or even claimed to be Christians of any sort. A few were mischievous, some had only a veneer of righteousness, and at least one was a deist. Yet the majority were church-going, Bible-quoting believers of God. It is hard to deny that when verses, a depiction of Moses, and the Ten Commandments are engraved on capital buildings. American patriot Patrick Henry said, "It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded, not by religionists, but by Christians, not on religions, but on the gospels of Jesus Christ."
- C. Many citizens — whole colonies even — ventured forth on these shores, not to find remarkable fortunes, but to find religious freedom. Those who settled Plymouth Rock in 1620 came to be able to worship God without government interference. "No King but King Jesus" was an American Revolutionary slogan.
- D. The First Continental Congress in Philadelphia began with the chaplain reading scripture. Thus the first words of record in American government were, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance" (Psalm 33:12).

II. Precept: God Makes The Standards And Nations Follow Them

- A. As owner and ruler of earth, God makes the rules. Each nation is responsible for following them. Whole chapters are dedicated to the burden of Babylon, Moab, Damascus, Egypt, Arabia, and Tyre (Isaiah 13-23).
- B. Many want to determine their own standards, but societies are not a “law unto themselves” (Romans 2:14). They cannot “go about to establish their own righteousness” (Romans 10:3; cp. Jeremiah 22:29).
- C. God has a genius plan to maintain righteousness on earth (Deuteronomy 4:6-9). He ordained three institutions to carry out this purpose: (1) the home (Genesis 2:22-24), which trans in righteousness (Proverbs 22:6; 2 Timothy 3:16-17); (2) the government (Genesis 9; Romans 13:1-5), which enforces righteousness; and, (3) the church (Acts 2:1; 1 Timothy 3:15), which promotes righteousness.

III. Process: God Removes Kings And Sets Up Kings

- A. Nations start, expand, mature, decline, and collapse. Studying history’s great empires — Britain, Spain, Rome, Persia, Babylon, Egypt — yields insights into what has happened and what is likely to happen. Winston Churchill observed, “The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.” The philosopher George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.
- B. Historians can tell what has happened. Media can tell what is happening. The Bible tells why it is happening. In the Old Testament God explained to Israel how to remain a nation (Leviticus 20:22-23).
- C. Sir John Glubb, an honored British general and historian, showed the seven stages through which empires pass:
 - 1. The age of outburst. Explorers (pioneers) are heroes.
 - 2. The age of conquerors. Soldiers are heroes.
 - 3. The age of commerce. Entrepreneurs are heroes.
 - 4. The age of affluence. The rich are heroes. The empire switches from offense to defense. It stops taking territory and starts building walls.
 - 5. The age of intellect. Intellectuals are heroes. Its educational institutions often produce skeptics who oppose the values and religious beliefs of early leaders.
 - 6. The age of decadence (cp. Deuteronomy 8:11-20; 31:20). Entertainers are heroes.
 - 7. The age of decline and collapse. There are no heroes.
- D. Paul also outlined four stages of society’s decline in Romans 1:
 - 1. The first stage of society’s decline is ignorance (Romans 1:18-22). Truth is suppressed (1:18, “hold” means “hold down”). Elites in a declining society suppress truth in order to live sinful lives unencumbered by guilt. For example, the homosexual movement today suppresses — through intimidation and lawsuits — studies showing its negative effects on society. Citizens forget God (1:21), giving Him neither glory nor thanks. Society goes dark (1:22; cp. Acts 17:30; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31), professing wisdom, but becoming fools. Closing its eyes to light (John 3:19), society follows a dark path of violence and lust.

2. The second stage is idolatry (Romans 1:23). “They worshipped and loved the creature rather than the Creator.” Once man forsook Jehovah, he was left with a god. Since man always worships, citizens set up new gods. In a godless society, man worships man and creatures — birds, beasts, and bugs. Idol worship today often takes the form of materialism and hedonism.
3. The third stage is indulgence (Romans 1:24-27). From idolatry to immorality is a short step. If man is his own god, then he can do what he pleases. Indulgences that will destroy a nation include the following:
 - a) Pleasure without conscience (James 5:5; 2 Peter 2:13).
 - b) Wealth without work (Proverbs 6:6; 2 Thessalonians 3:10).
 - c) Knowledge without character (Romans 11:25; 1 Corinthians 8:1).
 - d) Business without morality (Proverbs 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23; Amos 8:5).
 - e) Science without humanity (1 Timothy 6:20; Romans 1:31; 2 Timothy 3:3).
 - f) Politics without principles (Proverbs 28:15; Amos 2:6; Matthew 2:16).
 - g) Worship without sacrifice (2 Samuel 24:24; Malachi 1:12-14).
4. The fourth stage is impenitence (Romans 1:28-32). German philosopher Hegel cynically commented, “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.”

IV. Punishment: God’s Patience Gives Out And Gives Up On Restraining A Nation

- A. Anarchy follows impenitence. Paul thrice repeats four sobering words: “God gave them up [over]” (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). Where lust-driven sensuality and sexual perversion dominate, God ceases restraint and withholds blessing (2 Thessalonians 2:8-12). A nation that rejects God’s revelation is on its own.
- B. How long does it take? God told Noah that his generation had a 120-year reprieve (Genesis 6:3). In Abraham’s day the Amorites’ iniquity was not full, but four generations later Joshua was sent to conquer them (Genesis 15:16; Deuteronomy 7:1-2). Assyria lasted 247 years; Babylon, 208; Greece survived 231 years before a “king of fierce countenance” was sent to overthrow it (Daniel 8:23). In A.D. 70, the Jews filled their quota and were destroyed by the Romans (Matthew 23:32-35; 1 Thessalonians 2:16). The Roman Empire fell after 207 years (27 B.C.-A.D. 180).
- C. As America celebrates her birthday soon, what is happening? The most Christian nation in history is quickly becoming a godless nation. We are materially rich but spiritually poor. When our White House is bathed in the homosexual colors to celebrate the Supreme Court’s decision to legalize same-sex marriages, we are far from our godly roots.
- D. What is likely to happen? On one hand, judgment always falls on those who practice idolatry and immorality. No nation that shook its fist in God’s face has ever survived (Galatians 6:7). On the other hand, America has many strong congregations; Christian lights shine across the land and Christian salt flavors communities. While only four good people could be found and only three survived, if Sodom had possessed even ten righteous souls, it would have been spared (Genesis 18:32; 19:16).

Conclusion. Ultimately, America's fate depends on whether our people turn back to the Bible or pursue a national course of rejecting God (Jeremiah 18:8-9). God's promise still stands (Acts 10:35).

I am deeply indebted to Allen Webster for the use of his material.