

THE APATHY OF AMERICA

Selected Scriptures

In this lesson we survey America's past blessings, present condition, and prospects for the future.

OUTLINE

America was founded by people steeped in biblical principles. The nation grew with a Christian consensus in government and the marketplace. But that is no longer true; America is a post-Christian nation. America's past blessings are unmistakable, but her future is anything but clear.

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OVERVIEW

Almost 200 years ago, Professor Alexander Tyler wrote the following words about the fall of the Athenian Republic more than 2,000 years earlier:

A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves money from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates promising the most money from the public treasury, with the result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, always followed by dictatorship.

The average age of the world's greatest civilizations has been 200 years. These nations have progressed through the following sequence: From bondage to spiritual faith, from spiritual faith to great courage, from courage to liberty, from liberty to abundance, from abundance to selfishness, from selfishness to complacency, from complacency to apathy, from apathy to dependency and from dependency back to bondage.¹

An honest appraisal of our nation would seem to indicate that we are moving steadily toward the end of Professor Tyler's sequential list. It is not a stretch to describe our nation as "an apathetic nation." If Professor Tyler's analysis is correct, a return to dependency and bondage could be just around the corner for America, something Charles Ryrie warns has historical precedent:

Nations rise and nations fall. It is a two-way street. The might of ancient Babylon lasted only 86 years. The powerful Persian Empire did better—208 years. The glory of Greece was eclipsed after 268 years. Mighty Rome ruled for almost 9 centuries. The British Empire endured for about 250 years. The United States of America has celebrated her bicentennial. If we make it to a tri-centennial, we will beat the averages.²

To understand how devastating America's apathy is, it helps to go back to the beginning of the nation's story.

AMERICA AND THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

The nation's first president, George Washington, was a man of humility. While he came from a prominent Virginia family, and was asked to command the Revolutionary War army and lead the Constitutional Convention, he reluctantly eschewed all royal titles when he was elected the first president, settling on "Mr. President."

After his inauguration on April 30, 1789, President Washington spoke to the assembled leaders of the nation. One senator observed that the president seemed nervous—more nervous than he ever was in the midst of battles with the British. I don't think stage fright was the problem. I'm confident the first president of America was overwhelmed by a sense of Providential responsibility. The Founding Fathers were thoroughly versed in Scripture. They knew that it is God who establishes rulers and nations, and removes them when needed. They knew verses like Job 12:23: "He makes nations great, and destroys them; He enlarges nations, and guides them." And Daniel 2:20-21: "He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding." And other passages like Deuteronomy 32:8; 1 Chronicles 29:11-12; Proverbs 21:1; Daniel 4:17, 34-35; Acts 17:24, 26.

Most of America's leaders no longer have any sense of Providential responsibility. "In God We Trust" is still on our money, and the president still says "God bless the United States of America," but that is the extent of how much God is allowed into the hallowed halls of government. And it is the same in the public square—God has been moved to the margins of society.

Example: In 2011, the NBC broadcasting company covered the U.S. Open Golf Championship. Twice during the broadcast a segment was featured with children reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to America. Both times, the words "under God" and "indivisible" were omitted. After significant pushback, NBC said it made a mistake. But they did the same thing in 2015 in a promo for an upcoming television show called, ironically, "Allegiance." A chorus of voices is heard reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and, again, omitting the words "under God."³

From the banning of prayer in schools to changing "Merry Christmas" to "Happy Holidays" to the removal of the Ten Commandments from statehouse buildings . . . America is a changing nation.

AMERICA AND THE PROVISION OF GOD

In 1815, President James Madison proclaimed these words to our nation:

No people ought to feel greater obligations to celebrate the goodness of the Great Disposer of Events of the destiny of nations than the people of the United States . . . And to the same Divine author of Every Good and Perfect Gift we are

indebted for all those privileges and advantages, religious as well as civil, which are so richly enjoyed in this favored land.

The Blessing of Our Forefathers

The American democratic republic has long been hailed as the most brilliant form of government ever implemented. What was the source of these brilliant, revolutionary ideas? The Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Moses gave Israel a written constitution; a tripartite government of prophets, priests, and kings ruled a decentralized (12 tribal states) nation; all were equal before the throne of God. The Founders didn't think America was Israel or the Kingdom of God, but they certainly recognized the wisdom of how God governs and applied it freely to America's system of governance. America's presidents throughout history, until recently, have been more than happy to acknowledge God's blessings on America.

The Blessing of Our Freedom

Why do more emigrants strive to come to America than to other countries? For the chance to be free! Jesus expressed the yearning of the human spirit when He said "the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). The Founders acknowledged as much when they noted the Creator's endowment of "unalienable Rights" such as "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

The Founders wanted nothing to hinder the creatures' fulfillment of the Creator's blessing of freedom. They designed a government that would be *out of* the citizens' way, not *in* the citizens' way. Yet freedom comes with responsibilities and at a high cost. Think of all who have died in the last 250 years in defense of our freedom. Some are defending freedom on foreign shores at this very hour. If our children are to have the same freedoms we enjoy, we will have to defend them against all attacks.

If we begin to take our freedom for granted, it is a small step toward taking the Author of freedom for granted Himself. While our greatest freedom is the freedom from sin (John 8:36), God wants us to be free from tyranny as well. If we stop being willing to pay the price required to defend both then apathy is at our door.

The Blessing of Our Fortunes

America has been the most prosperous nation in human history.

1. Financial Blessings

Wealth isn't always a sign of God's blessing, but it would have been for Israel (Deuteronomy 28:1-14; 1 Kings 10:1-9). And

multiplication and prosperity are built into God's creation. Nature produces harvests of abundance as does the wise investor (Matthew 25:14-30). Profit and abundance speak of the greatness and generosity of God.

America has long been a nation of wealth whether measured by GDP or the number of billionaires. Perhaps America's wealth is tied to its generosity. What is important about wealth is not its quantity but what we do with it (1 Timothy 6:9-10; 17-19). And America has always been generous to less-fortunate countries, both nationally and individually.

How is America able to be generous? Because of the blessing of God. This was the conclusion of King David when he and his leaders gave generously to fund the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. Everything comes from God (1 Chronicles 29:14).

2. Intellectual Blessings

America's universities aren't the oldest but they are among the world's best. America's oldest universities were founded in New England for the training of ministers of the Gospel. Schools like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Colgate, Columbia, and Dartmouth still have mottos that reflect their original biblical worldview and purpose. Sadly, all these universities have abandoned their Gospel-centered curricula and focus. But academically, American universities remain among the best in the world.

3. Military Blessings

There had been no attacks on American soil since the Revolutionary War until September 11, 2001. It's like a hedge of protection had surrounded our nation. Article Four, Section Four of the Constitution states that the federal government will protect the states against invasion. By God's grace that mandate has been carried out. America's military has played a key role in defending freedom and liberty around the world.

4. Religious Blessings

From its founding, America has been a Christian-consensus nation. But in the 1960s, the term "post-Christian" began to be applied to our nation. In spite of the large percentage of American's who declare themselves to be Christians, Christianity is no longer seen as the guiding worldview in government and the marketplace. Secularism is on the rise. It is another danger sign for America that she is becoming a secular, if not agnostic, nation. Christianity is declining while non-Christian faiths are increasing. Increasing most of all are the "unaffiliated."⁴

In spite of America's blessed beginning and history, the future is a question mark.

AMERICA AND THE PLAN OF GOD

By many measurements America is still a great nation. But spiritually and morally, it's hard to make a case that America has not changed. The question must be asked, "If God is responsible for America's past blessings, and America turns her back on God, what does the future hold?" Many have asked, "Does the Bible say anything about America's future?" Many modern nations are mentioned in the Bible—those that have ancient foundations in the biblical world—but America is not one of them.

In my book, *What in the World Is Going On?*, I suggested four possible futures for America.

America May Be Included in the European Coalition

The coming Antichrist will lead a coalition of 10 modern nations, likely centered in Europe. It is possible that America will have become so weak morally and spiritually that she joins this coalition as a means of economic survival as the Antichrist's power and authority increase. In this case, America will be judged by God along with the Antichrist at the end of the Tribulation.

America May Be Invaded by Outside Forces

Today, eight nations besides America possess nuclear capability, and not all are friendly toward the United States. It is possible that America could suffer nuclear, cyber, or other attacks that could cripple her economy beyond immediate repair. Such an attack could seriously damage the nation and cripple our standing in the world.

America May Be Infected With Moral Decay

If revival does not come to America then we put ourselves at risk for judgment from God. The history of Israel shows that God does not wait forever for people to repent and return to Him. America is showing no signs of doing so at present and may never. Thirteen times in the period of the book of Judges the cycle of rebellion, retribution, repentance, and restoration was repeated. America has seen revivals in the past and could again. If she does not, she will atrophy into judgment at worst and insignificance at best. The terror attack of 9/11 showed signs of bringing America to its senses. But those signs quickly subsided as America returned her focus to materialism and pleasure.

America May Be Incapacitated Because of the Rapture

When the Rapture occurs, a significant portion of America's "salt and light" will be removed from earth. Not only that, but the restraining power of the Holy Spirit will be removed (2 Thessalonians 2:5-12). When that happens, a downward spiral will be set in motion from which the nation would not likely recover. America would suffer the terrible Tribulation judgments outlined in Revelation. If none of the other three scenarios happen first, this one eventually will.

AMERICA AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

America is a nation out of step with the will of God. The book of 1 Peter is one for the American Church. It was written to Christians who were trying to survive in a culture that was out of step with its Creator (1 Peter 5:6). The surrounding nations did not accept those Christians or understand them. Peter calls his readers "pilgrims"—they were exiles, strangers, and foreigners in their own lands (1 Peter 2:11). All Christians are spiritual foreigners just passing through this world, so Peter's letter is one we should be very familiar with. He reminds his readers that our hope is not in earthly resources, but in God alone.

Our Living Hope Rests in the Power of the Resurrection (1 Peter 1:3)

God has "begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." We have hope because Christ conquered death and the grave. Even if the worst should come to America and we lose our physical life in some way, we still have hope because of the resurrection. Because Christ lives, we live! Our hope and our future do not depend on the status of our nation. We want it to be peaceful and stable so the Gospel can be spread (1 Timothy 2:1-4). But our hope is in our future resurrection, not in political stability.

Our Living Hope Rests in the Promise of Our Reward (1 Peter 1:4)

There is an "inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you," Peter writes.

1. An Untarnished Inheritance

People in Peter's day lived in fear of the Roman army coming in and "spoiling" (corrupting) their land and property. But our reward in heaven is completely off-limits; it is un-spoilable.

2. An Undeclared Inheritance

Our inheritance is unstained; holy, pure, and clean (Revelation 21:27).

3. An Unfading Inheritance

The glory of America and other nations may fade away, but our inheritance is permanent and eternal (Matthew 6:19-20).

4. An Uncontested Inheritance

Our inheritance is reserved, guaranteed by God Himself. The Holy Spirit is the seal of that guarantee (Ephesians 1:14).

Our Living Hope Rests in Our Protection Until Christ's Return (1 Peter 1:5)

We are "kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Verse 4 says our inheritance is reserved for us and verse 5 says we are reserved for our inheritance. We can only win!

While we wait to receive our inheritance there are four things we must do:

1. Pay Our Taxes (Matthew 17:24-27)
2. Pray for Our Leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-3)
3. Participate in the Process (1 Peter 4:13)
4. Persevere in the Race (Hebrews 10:36)

In Jesus Christ we have a sure and certain hope for the future. We pray for our nation while we praise God for our citizenship in heaven.

Notes:

1. Commonly attributed to Alexander Tyler, a Scottish lord and history professor in the University of Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century, <http://theroadtoenmaus.org/RdLb/21PbAr/Hst/US/DmocaThnsUS.htm>.
2. Charles Ryrie, *The Best Is Yet to Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 106.
3. "Coats Asks NBC for Explanation of Why 'Under God' Omitted from Pledge during U.S. Open Broadcast," Website of U.S. Senator Dan Coats, June 21, 2011, <https://www.coats.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/coats-asks-nbc-for-explanation-of-why-under-god-omitted-from-pledge-during-us-open-broadcast>. Accessed May 3, 2016). Also Todd Starnes, "NBC omits 'God' from Pledge of Allegiance . . . again," Fox News Opinion web site, January 8, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2015/01/08/nbc-omits-god-from-pledge-allegiance-again.html>. Accessed May 3, 2016.
4. "America's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. Accessed May 4, 2016.

APPLICATION

1. Read Job 12:23-25.
 - a. What four things does Job say God does relative to nations? (verse 23)
 - b. What do verses 24-25 say about how God directs the actions of world leaders ("chiefs")?
 - c. What is the general context of these verses? What is Job saying about God? (verses 13-22)
 - d. How do these verses provide confidence when we survey the chaotic geo-political landscape of the world?
2. When America elects a president every four years, who is really in charge? (Daniel 2:21)
3. If God is "head over all" (1 Chronicles 29:11), how does that give us comfort about the future?

4. What can God do in the heart of any "king"? (Proverbs 21:1)

a. Why doesn't God change a leader's heart to prevent him from doing bad things? (Think about what God allowed the kings of Assyria and Babylon to do to Israel, or the Pharaohs of Egypt.)

b. Why must we trust that even the evil actions of "kings" are part of God's plan?

5. How did God's sovereign actions cause the pagan king of Babylon to respond? (Daniel 4:17, 34-35)

6. Summarize the blessings that were promised to Israel if she obeyed God's covenant? (Deuteronomy 28:1-14)

a. In general, what would happen if Israel disobeyed God's covenant? (Deuteronomy 28:15-68)

b. How does Deuteronomy 28:12b suggest whether America is in a state of blessing or cursing?

7. Read 1 Chronicles 29:14-17a.

a. What is the source of any nation's wealth? (verse 14)

b. What does verse 15 suggest about what man possesses by himself? How wealthy are "aliens and pilgrims" normally? What hope do they have?

c. How does verse 16 illustrate the principle of using wealth for God's glory?

- d. What does verse 17 suggest about wealth being a test? What is God testing?
- e. What does America's financial situation suggest about how we have fared in this test?
8. What guarantee do we have from God that our future is not dependent on what happens to America? (Ephesians 1:13-14)
9. What spiritual responsibility do we have relative to our political leaders? (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

DID YOU KNOW?

After George Washington's inauguration in New York City, he and members of Congress worshipped at St. Paul's Chapel in what is today lower Manhattan. It is just steps from Ground Zero where the former World Trade Center towers collapsed. Miraculously, the chapel was not destroyed; not even a window pane was broken. On that day, George Washington said in his speech to Congress, "Since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven, can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained." The fall of two towers dedicated to American commerce stand in stark contrast to the preservation of the chapel where the first President worshipped after warning Congress about disregarding God's "rules of order and right."