Decline of the Roman Empire

**Main Idea** Nothing lasts forever, even the mighty Roman Empire. In the year 410 C.E. the city of Rome was sacked but long before that, the empire had been divided in two. While the Western part disintegrated, the Eastern part became the Byzantine Empire which continued to hold influence for centuries.

Marcus Aurelius was last of the so-called “Good Emperors”. Following his death in 180 C.E. Rome’s power began to slowly decline. The enormous size of the empire, rising inflation, a growing divide between the rich and poor, and threats from the outside made the empire increasingly difficult to rule. Two great emperors, Diocletian and Constantine, helped the Roman Empire cling to power. It was Diocletian who first suggested that Rome have two emperors, one in the East and one in the West, to share power and responsibilities. Constantine created the new capital city in the East which was known as Constantinople. Eventually, however, internal conflict and outside pressure tore the empire apart.

Emperor Theodosius was the last emperor to rule both the Eastern and the Western parts of the Roman Empire. He successfully fought a series of battles against barbarian invasions and won two civil wars. However, his victories came at a price. Although he was victorious, his forces were seriously weakened.

When Theodosius died, his sons were named emperors of the East and West. At that time, they were too young to rule on their own so powerful nobles and generals ruled on their behalf. The Roman Empire was never again united under a single ruler.

While the Western Roman Empire succumbed, the Eastern Empire, also known as the Byzantine Empire, lived on. The capital, Constantinople, was an important center for commerce, scholarship, and art. The Byzantines borrowed heavily from the old Roman Empire; their society was based on Greek culture and Roman law. They spread Christianity in Eastern Europe.

**Western Roman Empire**

**Eastern Roman Empire**
Aeric was a Visigoth leader who had fought for Emperor Theodosius. He hoped to be named a general in the Roman army but when recognition never came, his army sacked Rome in 410 C.E. While the Romans were fighting the Goths, another group of barbarians, the Vandals, invaded Roman territory and they sacked Rome in 455 C.E. Finally, in 475 C.E. a fifteen year old Romulus Augustus became the last emperor of the West. A Visigoth named Odoacer attacked Romulus Augustus and forced him to abdicate. The surrender of the last Roman emperor marks the end of the Western Roman Empire.

**Causes of Decline**

**Economic Weakness** - Ruling such a huge empire was expensive! Heavy taxes were necessary to maintain the infrastructure and pay for the army. In the past, the costs had been offset by plundering new territory as the empire expanded. However, when expansion stopped, it became increasingly difficult to pay the bills.

**Barbarians at the Gates** - Traditional Roman enemies like the Goths and Vandals in the north were becoming stronger. The powerful Persian Empire bordered the Roman Empire in the east. Over time it became more difficult and more costly to keep these foes in check.

**Barbarians INSIDE the Gates** - As the empire expanded, the Romans weren’t able to find enough citizens to fill the ranks of the army. They increasingly hired the barbarians themselves! These men were loyal to their commanders but not to Rome. Meanwhile, many Roman nobles lost interest in serving as officers in the Roman army. While the Roman army was still formidable, it was less and less under the control of Rome’s leaders.

**Byzantine Society**

**Trade** - The capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, was located on the crossroads between Europe and Asia. Goods from as far away as China were traded in Constantinople.

**Scholarship** - the Byzantines collected scholarly works and literature from the Greeks & Romans as well as from the Middle East. Most of this information was lost in Western Europe after the fall of Rome but was reintroduced during the Crusades.

**Law** - The Byzantines instituted legal reforms based on Roman law. Justinian ordered that his scholars collect all the laws and legal opinions from the Roman Empire and compile them in a volume known as the *Justinian Code*. This was later used as the framework for legal systems throughout Western Europe.

**Architecture** - the Byzantines built great works of architecture like the *Hagia Sophia*. A dome like that of the Hagia Sophia would not be built in Western Europe for another 500 years!

The Byzantines continued to rule in the Eastern Mediterranean for hundreds of years. Then, in the 1300’s they faced a new threat from the Ottoman Turks. In 1453 C.E. the Ottomans captured Constantinople which brought the Byzantine Empire to an end. Nevertheless, through the Byzantines, the legacy of the Roman Empire lived on for about 1,000 years after the fall of Rome.