



"Man, made in the image of God, has a purpose—to be in relationship to God, who is there. Man forgets his purpose and thus he forgets who he is and what life means."
—Francis Schaeffer

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American Amnesia

Americans have a memory problem—and always have. It is not a recent development brought on by declining culture and morality. Amazingly, it is hereditary.

Most scientists and sociologists would scoff at such a claim. However, we all know that nations have dominant and persistent characteristics. Many observers credit culture with passing these traits on to subsequent generations, and it is true that culture plays a part. Yet, it does not explain everything because centuries of history show that these characteristics persist when cultural conditions change.

In 1983, the late Luigi Barzini wrote his best-known book, *The Europeans*. His concept is based upon this idea that nations have distinctive characteristics that reappear noticeably, especially in their interactions with other nations. He calls the Italians "flexible," the Dutch "careful," the French "quarrelsome," the British "imperturbable," the Germans "mutable," and the Americans "baffling." He says Europeans are baffled by Americans because we are so pragmatic; we do not seem to have any fixed ideology but do

whatever we must to solve a problem. Thus, Europeans have no idea what we will do next. We always seem to catch them unprepared for our next move.

This pragmatism has its roots in our basic forgetfulness. America reinvents itself with every generation, and sometimes even more frequently. We throw off the shackles and reminders of the past and start over. This is why generational researchers like Neil Howe and William Strauss (*Generations, 13th Gen, The Fourth Turning, Millennials Rising*) can discern fourteen distinctive generations in American history and describe how each changed the nation and its future.

Our proverbial statements can tell us a great deal about our national traits, and many of ours deal with the subject of time—particularly the present and the future, but hardly ever the past:

Don't let the grass grow under your feet.
Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.
Make hay while the sun shines.
There is no time like the present.
Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

We repeat the advice of George Santayana—"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"—like a mantra, but our actions belie it. Take, for instance, our penchant for getting involved in conflicts in which we cannot bring our full power to bear on the enemy (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, now Afghanistan, etc.) but must fight under conditions dictated by others. We tend to reinvent our basic institutions, such as school, welfare, and business models, every time a new idea comes along. Everything on our store shelves is "new and improved," and the old products that worked just fine cannot be found except in the dustbin of history.

What is amazing is that this was prophesied almost four-thousand years ago when Joseph named his firstborn son "Manasseh," whose descendants live in America: "For [God](#) has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house" ([Genesis 41:51](#)). Manasseh means "causing to forget," and his descendants have shown this trait ever since. Manassites forgot their ties to Europe and made a new life in America. Manassites forgot the governmental and

economic systems of Western culture and made new ones for themselves. Manassites forgot the horrors of civil strife and moved on to become the richest, most powerful nation on earth.

Unfortunately, Manasseh is quickly forgetting the God of Abraham, [Isaac](#), Jacob, and Joseph, their fathers. The church has proclaimed for the last several generations that it will take "the time of Jacob's trouble" ([Jeremiah 30:7](#)) to jog Manasseh's memory and turn them back to God:

Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations where they are carried captive; . . . they will loathe themselves for the evils which they committed in all their abominations. And they shall know that I am the LORD; I have not said in vain that I would bring this calamity upon them. ([Ezekiel 6: 9-10](#))

As Christians and Manassites, we need to make sure that we do not allow this trait to mar our relationship with God. We, "upon whom the ends of the ages has come," can forget our former lives apart from God and start anew, but we should never forget the lessons and examples of the past, "written for our admonition" ([I Corinthians 10:11](#)).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by John O. Reid

God gives us the capability of remembering in order to learn and retain lessons, fortifying us in the midst of grave trials. During these times of intense distress and tribulation, God expects that we use our memories to reflect upon His gifts, promises, and rewards. His gifts include His Holy Spirit enabling eternal life, spiritual gifts to enrich the church, and inspiration during a trial. God's promises include the assurance that He cannot lie, that godliness has immediate and long-term profit, and that He will never, never,

never, never, never leave us. God's rewards include attaining the mind of God, membership in His family with a new name, an office or responsibilities in the Kingdom of God-dependent upon our current efforts (at overcoming and growing) related to the abilities, talents, and opportunities He has given us.

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by John O. Reid

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