

We were aliens: Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

If the Ephesians forget who they were, they will presume God owes them something.

by [William H. Lamar IV](#) in the [July 12, 2003](#) issue

Only 87 entries separate America and amnesia in *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Tenth Edition*. Perhaps the name of our nation and the term designating memory loss live in the same lexical neighborhood because they are so fond of each other. I like to imagine them taking road trips together, drinking cognac, smoking cigars and reminiscing about days gone by. But the reminiscing part poses a problem. Amnesia is memory loss based on physical trauma or selectively ignoring events that cause discomfort; America is a great nation with a proclivity toward overlooking its painful past. Eureka! America and amnesia are friends of convenience. One doesn't want to reminisce, while the other is incapable of it.

Glossing over the past is as American as apple pie. Ask an American about evil and you will hear about Saddam Hussein or Adolf Hitler. To be sure, these two men personify death, brutality and destruction, but demonizing them does not help us. The ovens of Auschwitz stain humanity, but what about American trees bearing the strange, bloody fruit of black bodies? Hussein's genocide against non-Arabs is a travesty, but explain too, if you can, why there are so few Choctaw, Shawnee, Cherokee and Seminoles in this land. The hatred we see in the world has lived, and still lives, in America the beautiful.

Our political leaders designate "other" people and places as evil and engage in questionable policies because they know the body politic will buy that sort of rhetoric. We want to think of ourselves as good and others as bad. Thank God for biblical theology's insistence that human beings are equally capable of love and hate, of caring for one another and of crucifying undesirables.

The writer of Ephesians is on a mission from God to remind the Ephesians of their past. He knows that if the gentiles forget who they were, they will soon presume that God owes them something and decide to live under their own merit and not

under God's grace. Salvation, the writer insists, came to the gentiles by grace through faith, not through human works, but as a gift from God. Thus we can eliminate a reason to boast of anything but God's mercy. The warning sign is up: Do Not Forget the Gracious Acts of God. To keep them from forgetting the writer calls on the Ephesians to remember . . .

Remember that there was a time when the chosen or "circumcised" derided you and called you the "uncircumcised." Remember that you were without Christ and were strangers to the covenant, lacking hope and apart from God. And magnificently Jesus brought you from afar into the very presence of God through his blood. Jesus did not make peace between you and God; Jesus *is* the peace between you and God. He tore down the wall of separation and made one people of Jew and gentile.

Remember that you could not enter the temple, the holy place. There was a barrier between you and Israel even in God's house! Jesus came and proclaimed peace; through him you have been granted access to the Father. You are aliens no more, but citizens and members of the household of God.

This passage must be recalled time and time again. The Ephesians needed to hear their heritage—a story of exclusion that became a story of inclusion. This message is equally important for the church in America today. The proclamations of many churches would lead you to think that gentiles have always had equal access to God. And most of us are not taught that we are the gentiles. The scandal of that particularity stings, that God revealed Godself to Israel and chose them—not us—as God's people. That is hard for us to swallow. And let's not jump too quickly into our acceptance through Christ. Let's stay out here for a while—alienated, locked out, cast away. The truth of our past drives us to amnesia because we want to forget that there was a time when we did not belong.

But thank God for that fact. We are the sole superpower, but we did not belong. We have the smartest bombs and the biggest guns, but we did not belong. We have the strongest economy in the world, but we did not belong. We cannot allow amnesia to seduce us into believing that we have always had access. Honest meditation on the fact that we did not belong will make us more humble as a church, a people and a nation. We will be less likely to alienate others if we remember that we were aliens. We will be less likely to demonize the history and sinfulness of others if we remember our own troubled past. And maybe, just maybe, we will be a little more merciful and lot more thankful for the one who is our peace with God and God's

people.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus continues his work of tearing down walls and extending God's mercy to those who are scattered and alienated. He had compassion on the crowds, as he has had on us, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He began teaching them, beckoning the lost and leaderless, the alienated and disinherited, and teaching them that God has come near. Repent and believe this good news—God is for you, God seeks you, God loves you. All people are recipients of this good news—Jews and gentiles alike.

Remembering our past helps us to appreciate and not take for granted “the mighty acts of God through Christ Jesus.” We did not belong. Our relationship with God is not a right, but a gift. My prayer is that we will stop taking the gift for granted.