

April 22, 2007

## “Sorrowful But Not Surprised”

### Reflections on the Murders at Virginia Tech

FCF: Naïve understanding of the world in which we live

**PROPOSITION:** (magnet) Because of the effects of sin and death in this world,  
(anchor) we should not be surprised by even the most horrific events.

#### **TOPIC INTRODUCTION:**

Monday, April 16, 2007 is a day seared into our nation’s memory. I’ve really wrestled with what happened at Virginia Tech last week. I can almost envision concentric circles moving out from the campus. There in the midst of it all, in the storm of the pain, are the victims themselves and their families, the school and the community. Some have said they haven’t been able to sleep. Others have said that when they do, they haven’t been able to get up. Beyond that circle are those on the outside looking in – hurting for others in their hurt but yet far removed. And in between are folks like myself – alumni who spent formative years in a place that holds a soft spot in the heart.

Which explains something of my reaction to the news last Monday morning. “*No. Not that. Not there.*” Aching for the students in their desperate confusion to make sense of what has happened. Aching for families experiencing the worst kind of grief.

I’ve been interrogating myself and the Scriptures. I was shocked by what I was seeing. But why? Why was I so shocked, so stunned? Because I wasn’t expecting it. But why wasn’t I expecting it? Because deep inside, I was not believing, really taking to heart, some things I know to be true – things which God tells us repeatedly in His Word.

#### **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

#### **SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

In the early days of WW II, C. S. Lewis preached a sermon entitled, “Learning in War-Time.” In it, Lewis discussed whether it was right for some to be giving themselves to study while others were gearing themselves up for war ([READ Lewis, pp.62-63](#)):

*War makes death real to us, and that would have been regarded as one of its blessings by most of the great Christians of the past. They thought it good for us to be always aware of our mortality. I am inclined to think they were right...In ordinary times only a wise man can realize it. Now the stupidest of us knows. We see unmistakably the sort of universe in which we have all along been living, and must come to terms with.*

The horrors of this life have a way of ripping off the veneer. Such horrors don’t really increase the misery of our days. They show us what was there all the while – the reality we so desperately want to deny. We want to keep all that at bay, to slap up a veneer. But the state of this world will not go ignored but for so long. It has a way of getting noticed.

Some of you may recall something Francis Schaeffer said in the video series we finished a few weeks ago in our Adult CE class. In regard to his own struggle with cancer, he said he knew well that ours is a fallen abnormal age and that things are not as they should be. And so when hard ugly things come, he wasn’t surprised. He was grieved, he ached, mourned, and was filled with sorrow. But he wasn’t surprised.

There’s something of that in how we should respond to the events of this past week. The veneer has been ripped off. So we should be sorrowful but not surprised. For the effects of sin and death on this world are that real. The need we and everyone else in this world has for Jesus is that real. The wound is that deep. But the healing is that good.

And so we should be sorrowful. But not surprised. Let’s go further with this.

#### **I. THE REALITY OF THE FALL**

One of the reasons we should not be so surprised, so stunned, when such things happen – whatever scale they occur – is the reality of the Fall. It was an historical event.

### A) *Not an Imaginary Tale*

What we read in Genesis 3 is not an imaginary tale. It was an historical event.

#### 1. Place of myth

Now there's a place for tales and stories. Good fiction does not distract from reality. It may well lend insights into reality. Think Greek mythology or Tolkien's Middle Earth.

#### 2. Parallel accounts

That said, we have to acknowledge there are parallels in the myths of the ancient world to the biblical accounts. But it is a distant memory that's behind the similarities, an echo of the one true song. In some ways they get it right. But in other ways they get it wrong.

### B) *But an Historical Event*

The Genesis account is the one we know is true. The biblical authors, Old and New Testament, take it for granted Adam was a real historical person.

#### 1. The failed test

He failed the test of obedience by God not to eat of the forbidden tree lest he die. He ate and brought God's curse down upon himself and all his descendants – including us.

#### 2. The real effects

And this has had real effects. For we live in a cause and effect universe. Choices have consequences (**READ Romans 8:19-21**). Futility and decay – all traced to the Fall.

#### *Illustration:*

All with lasting repercussions. And history is filled with such things. Think just of our own nation. The policies towards and tension between the North and the South in the years following the Civil War. Some people still hold on to that. Or our own personal histories – when abuse occurs in childhood, the effects can linger on for years.

#### *Application:*

That's what we see here – real choices with real consequences unfolding before our eyes at a beautiful college campus now stained with blood. We need to be aware of where we are – a fallen world. If all we have are cosmetic problems, then all we need are cosmetic solutions. But our problems are deeper than that. If we continue to delude ourselves into thinking we're living in a garden spot, we will be totally unprepared for the next time we encounter acts of terrorism, tsunamis, hurricanes, cancer, or massacres.

We need to see that the situation is much worse than we dared fear – a fallen world. But we need to know Jesus is much better than we dared hope. So determined to restore, so necessary was the rescue, we read right after that Fall (**READ Genesis 3:14-15**). So the reality of man's Fall is that real. But so too is the reality of God's rescue.

## II. THE FRAGILITY OF LIFE

But back to what surprises and stuns us. Certainly the reality of the Fall. But also the fragility of life. Crazy as it sounds, somehow we are caught off guard here as well.

### A) *Not a Certainty of Years*

Despite the fact we have no certainty of how many years we will have here.

#### 1. We cannot know

We know we're limited as to how long we'll be on this earth. But don't know how long that will be. There's a certain number of days we have. But we don't know the number.

#### 2. We cannot presume

Which means it's foolish to presume anything – for ourselves or anyone else. After all, isn't that James' point (**READ James 4:13-15**)? What James is describing reflects a man-centered understanding of the most basic things, truly secular with no place for God.

*Illustration:*

Which brings me back to what I read last week ([READ DBI, “Death”](#)):

*(It) is the greatest of humankind’s enemies, a relentless Grim Reaper that shows no respect for age or wealth. It robs parents of a precious child, leaving them to mourn their loss for the rest of their lives. It deprives wives and children of their breadwinner and protector, leaving them vulnerable in a hostile world. It takes away an aging spouse, leaving a gray-haired senior citizen without a lifelong companion and closest friend. Sometimes it arrives suddenly and unannounced; at other times it approaches slowly, as if stalking or taunting its helpless victim. Sometimes it hauls away its victims en masse; on other occasions it targets individuals. It uses a variety of methods and weapons, but only rarely does it capture its prey without inflicting pain and terror. Power, beauty and wealth can usually overcome any obstacle, but (with it) they meet their match.*

*B) But a Security of Care*

With the fragility of life, death can come upon any one of us at any moment. We simply cannot boast with any certainty. But we can know a security. Security in Christ.

1. We cannot expect to be spared these things

We cannot expect to be spared such things in such a world. If Christ does not return first, death awaits us all. It has since the Fall. The bones of the saints lie in the ground.

2. But we can experience His care in the midst of these things

We cannot expect to be spared these things. But we can experience His care in the midst of them. What, after all, is the great assurance of Psalm 23? ([READ Psalm 23:1-4](#))

*Application:*

Now how do we bring these things together? What does it mean to go forward, knowing life is fragile and seeing that played out so dramatically, so brutally, this past week in Blacksburg? Listen to this prayer of Moses ([READ Psalm 90:1-6, 12](#)) Do we know how brief is our time, how thin is the line? Do we really? Where then are we placing our hope, our confidence, our trust? We should be intensely grateful for each moment we have, not presuming upon a single breath. Life is that fragile. That fragile.

I need to echo what I said before. We need to see that the situation is much worse than we dared fear. But we need to know Jesus is much better than we dared hope. It’s that bad. But He’s that good, entering into this very world, suffering the loss of others dear to Him, dying Himself, and walking beside us now. All so true we really can say with the Apostle Paul, without any fear of embarrassment, ([READ Romans 8:18](#)).

**III. THE DEPRAVITY OF MAN**

But there’s one last thing we lose sight of that feeds this sense of surprise and shock when such things occur as we’ve seen last week – the very real depravity of man.

*A) Not a Mild Inability*

And it is a depravity, not a mild inability ([READ Romans 3:10b-18](#)).

1. Not just to an isolated few

Now Paul is not describing something isolated to a few. It is pervasive. We are often so blind, so slow to see it, we live in denial of one of the most basic things about us.

2. Not just isolated to the mind

But this is not isolated to a few. Nor is it isolated to just the mind. We cannot dismiss such murderous acts as simply because of something being wrong “up here.” It may be. But it’s “in here” as well. Listen to Jeremiah’s words ([READ Jeremiah 17:9](#)).

*B) But a Radical Depravity*

There is evil in the world. And in us. A radical depravity, not a mild inability.

1. Not utterly corrupt

Not to say we are utterly corrupt. I am not as depraved, bent, twisted, and sinful as I could be. I am all those things but not as much as I could be. We are not utterly corrupt.

2. But thoroughly corrupt

But we are thoroughly corrupt. No part of us unaffected. My mind, my emotions, my body – all of me. And it comes out in everything I do – my thoughts, my words, and my actions. I am not basically good. At my very core, I am a sinner. Which means I sin.

*Illustration:*

Francis Schaeffer described us as being like “glorious ruins,” like the crumbling columns of the Roman Coliseum – wondrous to behold yet ruins now a glimmer of their former glory. Think how we saw that played out at Virginia Tech – the stark contrasts between Cho Seung-Hui’s actions and the student and faculty heroics. Or, in another way, in the Hokie Spirit Fund that has been set up for the benefit of the families. A great idea but still the university had to warn people to beware of other fraudulent charities.

*Application:*

We are glorious ruins. We need to recognize the glory. But we need to see the ruinous part as well. Our problem is deeper than bad behavior. Demonizing won’t solve it. Just firing the people in charge won’t solve it. Just beefing up security and writing more laws won’t solve it. It’s too deep. The human race is not made up of basically good people with just a few bad apples that occasionally spoil it for the rest of us. If we ignore the reality of sin and evil, we leave ourselves wide open to its worst attacks.

Yes, societal effects are real. And a lot has already been speculated on how that led to all this. But how did the society become corrupt? And what is “society” but a mass of individuals like us? We have to recognize this about ourselves – glorious ruins. We have to say, with humility and tears, it is but for the grace of God there go I.

We need to see that the situation is much worse than we dared fear. But we need to know Jesus is much better than we dared hope. He is the Savior. And He is the Savior in the highest, deepest, richest sense. How does God respond to such evil? He has taken it upon Himself, suffering what we had coming, freeing us from it – partially now and fully one day in the future. Our depravity is that bad. But Jesus is that good.

### **CONCLUSION:**

I began with some wisdom from C. S. Lewis. Let me end with that. Lewis once said ([READ quote](#)), “*In prosperity God whispers to us, but in adversity he shouts at us.*” That is to say, God speaks to us in our troubles. And there is much that troubles us about what happened on Virginia Tech’s campus this past week. Some of you have said as much to me. God speaks to us in our troubles. So what then is He saying to you now?

Some of us may be or feel quite close to it. You feel a sense of loss in what happened. Listen. You are being called to look to the only God among all the faiths of the world who Himself has lost – His only Son. Jesus Himself was the victim of a hostile attack. You cannot (none of us can) handle the brutality of life with either a general god who has not suffered or a universe with no god at all. You have no consolation without looking to Him. And He has proved His love for us by entering into our suffering.

Others are on the outside – surprised, stunned by all this. You need to re-examine where your security is to be found. It’s not in anyone, anything, anyplace on this earth. You cannot control a thing. You cannot make yourself safe and secure. Only Christ gives the rest, security, and safety we seek. Things are that bad. But He is that good.

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