

Scholarship in a time of war

Christians must continue learning in difficult times

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How do you spell relief? I had my first 9/11-induced nightmare last week. The drugs of our culture--escape into Hollywood's fictions or even the title-drive of the Mariners--don't spell relief. These days, I find myself looking up and listening. If I see or hear a plane, any plane, I pray. And if I see an empty Seattle sky, I pray all the more. Certainly, faithful responses to the trials of our day include continuing to pray and continuing to love our neighbors--especially those with spiritual beliefs that differ from ours. Yet there is a more basic response we overlook to our peril. It is the call to repent.

Jesus himself faced questions about sudden death from state-sponsored terrorism and from collapsing towers. Luke 13 records his reply to those asking about the front-page horrors of his day. Surprisingly, his first response was not one of comfort and compassion for the victims and their families, or even a cry for justice against the pawns of evil. Rather, his pointed answer was directed at his questioners and hearers, "unless you repent you will all likewise perish." He looked beyond the immediate crisis to the ultimate one. Jesus left them with the parable of the Barren Fig Tree. Our sorry unfruitfulness is no mystery to the patient gardener of our souls.

World War II serves as another parallel for our times. On Sept. 1, 1939, Nazi troops invaded Poland and within days Great Britain, France and other countries had declared war on Germany. All of Europe was poised on the brink. The college students of England would themselves become targets during the Battle of Britain, as the German Luftwaffe brought the war home to England in their very next semester.

In the anxiousness of that October, Oxford professor C. S. Lewis preached his sermon, "Learning in War-time." This great apologist for the Christian faith, himself wounded as a young British officer during World War I, was speaking to every Christian, and especially every Christian college student, in that address.

If you've ever asked yourself either "Why do I spend my time in seemingly pointless studies when my nation faces such peril?" or the better question, "Why do I study here in ease while my 'neighbor' pounds for entry at the wrong door to eternity?," Dr. Lewis gives answers that we would be wise to heed. As he put the question, Christians must ask how we can "spend any fraction of the little time allowed [us] in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology."

Lewis' stirring answers include these lines: "If our parents have sent us to Oxford [or SPU], if our country allows us to remain there, this is prima facie evidence that the life which we, at any rate, can best lead to the glory of God at present is the learned life." "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered." "[The] scholar

has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age."

In his conclusion, Lewis told of "the three enemies which war raises up against the scholar," and their antidotes. The first enemy is excitement. War, even our current stifling, low-lying fog of a war is, in a sense, a distraction from our duty. You and I are not in a position to do more at present than pray and fearlessly love our neighbor, and as I wrote at the outset, to repent of that which displeases our Heavenly Monarch. We must understand that this war is but another, albeit excruciating, birth pang of his coming. Why indeed did Christ go through with the agony and shame of the Cross, except "for the joy that was set before Him" (Heb. 12:2)? We, too, now suffer with him through the pains of this birth.

The second enemy is frustration. Will we have time to finish what we've begun? The threat of war, especially when coupled with the ever-changing predictions of self-styled "prophecy experts," can have careless believers putting off the vital duties of the present. Because of imagined future terrors, duties as varied as preparing for that next exam or discovering the romance of a lifetime may be missed. The fact is, as Lewis reminds us, there is never enough time. But there is the present: every bit of 'now' is yours in which to work (and play) "as unto the Lord." Lewis' oft-quoted line is, "The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received."

The final enemy of the scholar in wartime is fear. But as Lewis says, "What does war do to death? It certainly does not make it more frequent: 100 percent of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased." The apostle Paul tells us "the days are evil." This is not news.

War makes much of the gray of life disperse into its components, black and white. Lewis finishes, "If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon. But if we thought that for some souls, and at some times, the life of learning, humbly offered to God, was, in its own small way, one of the appointed approaches to the Divine reality and the Divine beauty which we hope to enjoy hereafter, we can think so still."

Let us therefore repent--repent of our sin, always, but also of our excited distractibility, our immobilizing frustration and our easy slide into fearfulness. God has each of us here at college, this college, for the very best of reasons--his.