

Title: **Lessons From A Tragedy**

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The new Batman movie opened this weekend and people across the country flocked to the midnight showing. In Aurora, Colorado, however, the pleasant anticipation and excitement surrounding the release the new movie turned to terror and suffering as a gunman by the name of James Holmes opened fire in a crowded theater, killing twelve people and injuring another fifty-eight.

There is always some danger in writing about a tragedy so soon after it occurs if one must rely on the news media for information. Simply put, the news media don't always correctly report the details. Sometimes the actual circumstances of the situation are still uncertain or being ascertained; sometimes reporters, in the race to be the first to report on an event, "rush" the story and accuracy suffers. I was unaware of the tragedy in Aurora until later in the same day, but it has captured my attention in a visceral way.

By all descriptions, the theater massacre in Aurora was horrific. One person described it well as a "tragic and utterly mindless act of selfish madness." My interest in the shooting, however, is not motivated by the same morbid curiosity manifested by some motorists who slow down to a crawl when passing the scene of a traffic accident, gawking in order to determine if there were any serious injuries or fatalities. Perhaps it is because I have friends and family members who went to a local theater for the midnight showing of this movie as well. Perhaps it is because the tragedy and the resultant news coverage have impressed me again with several "life-truths." The author of Ecclesiastes observed that it is "better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart" (7:2). Tragedies and hardships often have a way of making us more contemplative than occasions of celebration.

It appears that James Holmes is neither a gang-banger nor mentally deficient person. A 24-year-old doctoral candidate in neuroscience, it is yet unclear what his exact motivation was for his terrible violence. In addition to the massacre in the theater, he had booby-trapped his apartment with improvised explosive devices that authorities have suggested might have taken months to plan, build and install. Other details of his actions on Friday indicate that he had been planning these events for quite some time.

Yet his neighbors, when interviewed, denied seeing any signs of impending violence in James Holmes. He was just another university student. Early indications are that his mother, contacted after the shootings, may have suspected that all was not right with her son. I am struck by the fact that we do not know what is going through the minds of those around us. In an effort to illustrate the inability of man to know the mind of God apart from divine revelation, Paul asked a question clearly intended to be rhetorical: "For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?" (1 Corinthians 2:11a).

It is certainly true that the heart (i.e., the mind) is the treasury of a man, from which he speaks and acts (Matthew 12:34-37; Mark 7:20-23). Some individuals become very skilled at hiding their true emotions or opinions for a time (Proverbs 23:6-8), but eventually the truth is revealed. It appears that James Holmes was thinking and planning dark things for some time, but those around him were unaware of the true condition of his heart. Although we often tend to assume that we understand the character/motivations of others, it would serve us well to remember that things are not always as they appear.

As I watched the news coverage and thought about this tragedy, I was most impressed by the tenuous nature of life. How many times have I gone to the local theater without any thought about the possibility of dying there as a victim of violence?

Alex Sullivan was one of the persons killed in the shooting. He was 27 years old; in fact, Friday was his birthday. He texted to others as he awaited the beginning of the film – “best birthday ever.” His first wedding anniversary was to be Sunday, July 22. No doubt like the other victims, he had no inkling that he would not even finish the movie before his life would be over.

Another one of the persons killed was Jessica Ghawi, aged 24. She had actually survived another shooting in a mall in Toronto, Canada, in which two people were killed and several others injured. According to an Associated Press new story, she has written concerning her experience in Toronto: “I was shown how fragile life was on Saturday. I saw the terror on bystanders' faces. I saw the victims of a senseless crime. I saw lives change. I was reminded that we don't know when or where our time on Earth will end. When or where we will breathe our last breath.” Jessica drew her last breath at the theater in Aurora this past Friday, but didn't know until her final moments that her time on earth was over.

Lots of people died on Friday. I am not talking about the consequences of the massacre in Aurora. Just considering the population of the United States, it is absolutely certain that hundreds of people died on Friday. Some of them died as the result of sickness, others due to accidents and probably some as the victims of violence. We could probably say the same thing about any particular day. And yet, apart from the death of celebrities or unusual circumstances, the nation goes about its business with hardly any notice. The reason is found in James 4:13-16. Our lives are like a vapor -- brief in their length and gone in a moment. The tragedy in Aurora captures our attention because of the number of people who died suddenly and helplessly as the result of calculated violence. No one expects to die during a trip to theater. We are reminded in a powerful way that, despite our plans for the future, we do not know what the morrow will bring.

Finally, the evil actions like those of James Holmes help me to better understand the imprecatory psalms, those biblical psalms in which the author calls for the divine punishment of those persecuting him or righteous people in general.

I don't personally know the shooter. I didn't know any of those who were killed. And yet, my heart's desire is for the perpetrator of this violence to be severely punished. I don't hate him – I don't even know him – but I am keenly conscious of the terrible suffering that he has caused, both for those whom he killed or injured and for all the people who lost loved ones. I am troubled by the helplessness of those people who were mercilessly gunned down in a place where they had felt safe. I am saddened by the lost opportunities and relationships ended in such a meaningless way. And, like the authors of the imprecatory psalms, I want to see justice done.

If history is any indication of what we can expect, the next few days will be filled with more reporting on this tragedy and then Americans will slowly forget about what happened in Aurora as the shock wears off. Hopefully, some of the lessons to be learned there will not be forgotten as well.