

Title: What Went Wrong? (trying to make sense of seemingly “senseless” events)

Text: Habakkuk 3.17-19

Theme: God remains good and sovereign in the midst of tragedy.

Series/Occasion: April, 2007 (killing of 32 students at Virginia Tech)

Prop Stmt We trust in the supremacy of God in all things, even in tragedy.

Read Text:

I rarely, if ever watch network news. I rarely, watch local news. Henry Thoreau said that if you know lightning hits trees, you don't have to know every time a tree is struck by lightning. It is sad, but true, that acts of violence in our schools, in our cities, in our world are becoming like bombings in Baghdad. We don't flinch as much. Part of the reason I do not watch the news is because of the dehumanizing effect it can have. If you hear over and over of people being killed, hurt, bombed destroyed in some way, you become calloused to it over time. You start to lose the ability to mourn. The stories are sound bites in between commercials and just before the weather and sports and the latest news on the stock market. I also don't like to watch the news because it is voyeuristic and often irresponsible. Don't act shocked and saddened and then encourage evil atrocities by giving killers a national platform by playing their videos on TV. That almost guarantees that we will be seeing this sort of thing again. Evil, rage and anger is burning enough, it needs no wind of encouragement.

For these reasons, I had no particular interest in addressing this topic this morning, and was focusing my study earlier in the week on 1 Corinthians 13.8. But I obviously changed my mind, because there seems to be a public gag order on speaking clearly and propositionally about God and evil. When these sorts of things happen, we interview the specialists who talk and talk and talk and uses coded and vague words about being troubled and having issues and the need for others to reach out, and what a shame that we do not have better support services. In other words it is the government's fault, or society's fault that this man stalked women, set fire to his dorm room, wrote violent plays and eventually killed 32 people. Why can't we just say that whatever else was going on, this was evil? This was sin. It is academic and vocational suicide to call a person evil. We have out grown evil. We are more sophisticated now than to believe that out-dated Puritanical notion that people actually have evil in them. No one is evil, we are told. People only do bad things as a cry for help. The fault is someone else's. The boy was bullied, he was made fun of. Ok, so...does that mean that those who are doing the bullying are evil? No, because they are only crying out for help, and need therapy too...and on and on the nonsense goes until no one is willing to be an adult and stand up and say, I am a moral agent, made in the image of God with the capacity to make choices and be held responsible for those. This is the fuzzy, hazy world of clouded words and images in which you live. Because there is a gag order on God and sin, when our world is confronted with evil, it coughs and panics, because it does not know what to do. This morning, I am attempting to give you a biblical apologetic, a template, a grid that helps you understand how to sort through events like this.

First, we wanted to know “what.” What happened? Then, we want to know “who.” Who did it, and who was killed, who was injured. We want to know “how.” How did this take place? And of course, the cloud that hangs over all of these questions is that of “why.” Why did this guy do this? The assumption is, if we find out what went wrong then we can fix it, and then assure ourselves that we have learned from it, and that something like this will never happen again. That is what we want to think, so that life can get back to normal. But, Oklahoma City, Columbine, Beslan and now Virginia Tech are added to a very long, and very ancient and growing list of tragedies.

Why did this happen? What went wrong with this guy who did this? What is going on when questions like this are raised? People are attempting to assign blame or responsibility. But before we can try to answer that question, I want you to stop and think a little deeper about the question itself. This is not the last time your world is going to be affected by tragedy. This is not the last time that you and others in your world will try to make sense of a seemingly senseless act. Why that day? Why that dorm? Why that time? Why that building, that room, that teacher?

### **1. Why do we even ask the question why?**

The question itself assumes that there is a reason. The question why assumes that there is meaning and intent to a person’s actions. If there is meaning and intent to actions, then there has to be meaning and intent to life. If there is no ultimate meaning, purpose or reason to life, then there is no immediate meaning, purpose or reason for life’s decisions. Without ultimate meaning, there is no meaning at all. But, the very fact that we instinctively want to know why is a very vivid illustration of the fact that we believe that there is a “why” to actions. I am just pointing out the obvious, that if there is a “why” to our actions, then there is an ultimate why. There is an ultimate meaning, purpose and reason for life. But, before we attempt to look at “why” this happened, I want to point out something else.

### **2. Realizing that something went wrong assumes a moral absolute.**

You cannot say that this event was wrong, unless you believe that there is such a thing as right and wrong. If you believe that this action was wrong, what made it wrong? What is truly wrong or was it (to borrow the nonsensical language of philosophy today) only wrong for you, but not necessarily wrong for everyone else? Where did right and wrong come from? If, instead of being created, we actually evolved from some primordial swamp, and over the course of a few billion years mutated into our current state (pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, nor to the glaring absence of any examples of this taking place), then, if the origin of the species is not God, but matter, then there is no ultimate meaning, purpose and no right and no wrong. If that is the case and you really believe that there is no personal God who created life, then stop whining about someone killing a few people, because if you really believe evolution, then all that happened on Monday was the survival of the fittest, while the unfit were not able to get out of the way. If there is no God, then there is no tragedy because life does not matter – plain and simple. But, if life has no meaning, then language has no meaning, and words have no

meaning so we cannot even have a conversation or have dictionaries. One more thing before we move on:

### 3. **“Learning the cause” assumes that sin is rational.**

You hear these sorts of comments: “What made this guy snap?” “Nobody in his right mind would do such an awful thing!” When we ask these types of questions, or make these types of statements, we are trying to make sense of a seemingly senseless act. While an act may make sense to the person doing it, that does not mean that the act actually makes sense. In Romans 1.21, we read about the person who in spite of seeing all of the evidences of God around him, rejects God. The Bible says that the thinking of a person like this is futile and that their heart is foolish and darkened. Sin does not always make sense. Here is the tension, and it is significant.

Laws cannot legislate the heart. Until you can find a way to change people’s hearts, you are going to have problems. That does not mean that you do not have laws, just remember that passing a law does not take care of the problem. Because here is the line of thinking. This kid was not accepted by his world, and felt like an outsider, and this is what made him do what he did. Therefore, if we can make it a crime when people hurt each other’s feelings, then things like this will never happen again. What if this guy was angry over being an outsider but, he was an outsider because he acted like a jerk? Whose fault is that? We can try to pass laws about no bullying allowed and we can say pass legislation about “hate crimes” and make laws that are designed to stop kids from making fun of each other all that we want. But laws never get to the heart. Every person in this world has felt like an outsider and sometimes we bring it on ourselves. But so much of what we hear is that we should do a better job at identifying troubled people like this and help them, meaning, this is society’s fault. This young man would not be troubled if his world was perfect. We need to make laws to help make certain that we have a perfect world for every person.

Jeremiah 17.9 – The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.

How do we make sense of this? What are we supposed to do with this? How should we approach this? There are basically three views that people have.

#### **View #1 – There is no God**

The problem with this view is this; right, wrong, pain, suffering, loss is all an illusion. To mourn, light candles, make speeches, give hugs and try to provide support for others makes no sense, because there is no meaning to this or anything. You cannot answer the “why” question because there is no answer to anything.

#### **View #2 – There is a God, but He is weak.**

This is the view that there is a God who cares about us, but He is not an absolute being. He left people in complete control of this world. God is just as surprised and hurt and

upset as you are over all of this. The benefit of this view is that we can hold on to a belief in God, but we do not ask Him why this happened, because if He knew it was going to take place then, He would have stopped it. This way, God cannot be held responsible for the events that take place and we can still have a God who cares about us.

The immediate problem with option two is; why pray? If all that God is good for is to give us hugs when we scrape our knees, but has no ultimate control over anything, then what kind of being like that is worthy of our worship? According to option two, God is not God, He is only a therapist, who can listen and feel sorry with us.

The ultimate problem with option 2 is that the Bible is full of statements that make it clear that God is not weak, distant and disconnected with the events of this world. He is supremely sovereign over everything that takes place in this universe, whether that be the flight of the tiniest of birds, the path of the largest of hurricanes, or the seemingly random acts of violence and rage. He is Sovereign.

Matthew 10.29 – “Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from you’re the will of your Father.”

Matthew 8.27 – “Even the winds and the waves obey him.”

Proverbs 16.33 – “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”

Proverbs 21.1- “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse where he pleases.”

Lamentations 3.37 – “Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?”

Amos 3.6- “When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?”

Mark 1.27- “He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.”

Isaiah 46.9-11 – “Remember the former things, those of along ago; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please....What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.”

That leaves us with one final position.

### **View #3 – There is a God who is Sovereign.**

This is the view that God is in charge and in control. If you accept this premise, then you have this apparent tension. How can there be a God and bad things like this happen?

View #3 has two options.

#### **A. All-powerful being who is bad!**

Again, this is more like an earlier problem. If God is bad, then how can you explain good? But this all flies in the face of God's revelation of Himself.

1 John 1.5 – “God is light, in him there is no darkness at all.”

Psalm 25.8 – “Good and upright is the Lord.”

Isaiah 6.3 – “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Genesis 50.20 – “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

Romans 8.28-30

### **B. All-powerful being who is good.**

If God is good and if God is truly great and Sovereign then, how can you explain tragedy like this?

- 1) God created people with the capacity to sin and God permitted sin to enter into this world through Adam and Eve.

God knew that Adam would sin before He made Adam. This is clear from Ephesians 1.4 which tells us that God chose to rescue us from our sin before the creation of the world. God had a plan to save us, because God knew that in choosing to make us, He was permitting the existence of evil. Even though God permitted evil to exist, God remains Supreme and Sovereign over evil. Even evil, just like Satan, ultimately serves the purposes of God.

When God created people he gave each of us the ability to make choices and God holds us responsible for the choices that we make. God made that very clear to Adam and Eve in the garden. Your choices have consequences. When Adam sinned, the consequences were enormous! The entire human race and creation was affected and every human being was entirely affected. Sin is serious! Sin is tragic! Sin is devastating! Our entire beings are affected by sin. Sin affects us physiologically. Sin affects our bodies. We live with the affects of the curse, which is why these bodies deteriorate and eventually die. All disease is ultimately a result of the fall of mankind into sin. But, God does not hold me responsible for the diseases that come from living in this sin-cursed world. He does hold me responsible for the choices that I make.

I bring that up, because when a college student calculates and pre-meditates an atrocious act that we witnessed on Monday, we want to say, “Oh, he had to be out of his mind.” “He had to be mentally ill.” “There is no way that he could really know what he was

doing.” So far, it appears that he really did know what he was doing and planned it. Are you saying that he is not truly responsible? Please understand that sin is extremely serious. You cannot handle sin, sin handles you. What we witnessed on Monday was an illustration of what can happen when a life is given over to hate.

2) The affects of sin stand as a giant billboard revealing how truly awful sin really is.

This shooting was evil and it has terrible, terrible, generational consequences. Sin is truly awful. This shooting was evil. But along with that, I need to understand that my sin is truly evil as well. We tend to minimize the awfulness and the true evil of sin. When you are confronted with evil like this, it is an opportunity to acknowledge that sin is a very serious and awful thing.

3) Sin serves the ultimate purposes of God.

Sin is not sovereign, God is. Sin does not thwart God’s plan. This does not make sin any less sinful, but it does make God’s grace, even more amazing. Two examples: Joseph’s brothers decision to sell him into slavery, was evil. God used their evil to accomplish his plan which actually resulted in their own rescue. That does not make their sin, any less sinful, but it does show the amazing plan of God. Example #2: Isaiah 10:5-7 Assyria is used by God to punish Israel for Israel’s disobedience. But, Assyria does not see it that way. Assyria is not aware that it is carrying out God’s purposes and because Assyria is doing what it wants to do, God holds Assyria responsible for its evil, even though the evil of Assyria was ultimately serving the purposes of God.

4) Since ultimate life is life in and with Christ, Christ will more than compensate any of His children for any loss incurred in this life.

Jim Elliot and Nate Saint were murdered by Auca Indians. Life with Christ in eternity will more than compensate Jim, Nate and their families for the loss they incurred in this life. For to me to live, is Christ, and to die is gain. This does not lessen the loss. The loss is real, it is heavy and hurts. But, if the loss is this great, how much greater will the gain be?

5) Christ was murdered so that you could understand how much God loved you. Sin and anger and murder came so that Christ could be murdered at the hands of sinful and angry men.

The evil deeds of men were the occasion for Christ’s death. You would never know God as redeemer or as Savior apart from the death of Christ.

In sorrow, we still rejoice. In suffering, we still hope.