

This Sunday, Steve kicked off our Jesus Series with a challenging message around the age-old question: “Why do bad things happen to good people?”

In trying to help us deal with this question, we looked at the text in Matthew 14:1-12 which tells the story of the gruesome death of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah (a priest who served in the temple) and Elizabeth (a relative of Jesus’ mother, Mary). His birth was miraculous because Elizabeth was barren and both she and Zechariah were old. The Bible tells us that both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. (Luke 1:6).

One evening, Zechariah was serving in the temple and the angel, Gabriel appeared to him; announcing that he would have a son and was to name him John: *He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.* (Luke 1:14,16). Zechariah at first doubted the angel and was then struck dumb and wasn’t able to speak until the baby was born and named.

When the time came for the baby to be born, the neighbours and relatives figured he would be called Zechariah after his father. But Zechariah writes on a tablet “his name will be John”. Immediately after that, Zechariah was able to speak again! *Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.* Luke 1:66.

John became a powerful preacher – crowds from all over would go out into the desert to listen to him preach. In Matthew, chapter 3, we read that he used to dress in a coat made of camel’s hair with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey. John preached an uncompromising message, calling on people to repent. He would baptise people in the Jordan river (earning him the name John the Baptist). John was the one who baptised Jesus and saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove. He heard the audible voice of the Father from heaven. John fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies that a prophet would come to prepare the way for the Messiah – Jesus.

Around the age of 32, John the Baptist was thrown into prison by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Herodias Antipas was a man whose life was given over to power and lust rather than service and right living. He pursued Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Philip. John the Baptist had repeatedly told Herod

that he was in violation of God’s law in having Herodias as his wife. Herod and Herodias were already in disfavour with the Jews, and John’s accusations did not help. John’s rebukes stung them with the result that they wanted to kill him, but since they feared the reaction of the Jews, Herod threw John in prison.

It was Herod who gave orders for the beheading of John. This was the consequence of a promise made to his daughter in the heat of being pleased by her dancing: *On Herod’s birthday, the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, ‘Give me here on a dish the head of John the Baptist.’ The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in prison.*

*His head was brought in on a dish and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John’s disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.*(Matthew 14:6–12).

This story raises the BIG question: WHY did this happen to John? He was a good person, and yet these terrible things happened to him. And of course, that raises a further question: **Why does suffering happen in the world, and more particularly, in my life?** This is probably the most common and most difficult question that people have regarding God and faith. If God is All-powerful, WHY do these things happen?

#### Some causes of suffering:

- Human choice (my own, or consequences of someone else’s choice)
- Sin in the world
- The laws of nature
- The devil (NB: don’t give him too much credit - he’s not omnipresent, nor omniscient)

But this still doesn’t help to answer: Why did that happen to ME? God very seldom answers the WHY in His Bible, but He has got a lot to say about HOW we should respond when these things happen:

#### 1. Look up

After John the Baptist was killed, his followers went to Jesus: *“Then they went and told Jesus.”* Matthew 14:12. Sometimes we tend to presume that God has abandoned us and we are alone in our suffering, but nothing could be further from the truth. When we draw close to God in our suffering, there’s a sweetness that’s not found anywhere else. *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.* John 16:33.

Some of us are under the false belief that if we are in God’s will, doing things His way, that everything will

go right in our lives. John the Baptist is a good example of this not being true. However, God still has us in His hand during these times.

When we go through these struggles, it's important to still process our emotions. God gave us the gift of emotion, and it's there to be experienced (processed) before we move on. Jesus sets an example on this when He hears of the death of John the Baptist: *When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.* Matthew 14:13.

### 2. Look inward

In tough times, it's always helpful to ask: "how can I grow through this?"; "what is God teaching me through this?" Some fruit in our lives only grows in the valleys. Fruits like perseverance, patience, dependence, graciousness... There is a work that God does in these deep, painful places that He can do nowhere else.

### 3. Look outward

One of the great works that God brings about in our

hearts through suffering is increased compassion and empathy. It's not necessarily about having the answers, but being present in supporting others through a similar journey or time.

### 4. Look forward

If you are a Christ-follower, this life is the only one with suffering. John the Baptist's story is not over. The Bible promises us that in eternity there will be no pain, no sorrow, no tears, no death... No matter what struggles we face, there is better ahead: *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* 2 Corinthians 4:8, 16-18.

In this, we find hope.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Icebreaker (Choose 1)

- Go around the group sharing your highs and lows for the past week
- What book or story has had the biggest impact on you (aside from the Bible)?

### Questions For Groups (Choose 2 or 3)

1. What stood out to you from Sunday's message?
2. On Sunday Steve said that God doesn't often answer the 'WHY' questions, e.g. Why did that bad thing happen? But God does tell us HOW to respond to personal pain and suffering. In what way does this idea help you to process difficulties & pain?
3. Read James 1:2-4 and Romans 5:1-5. What hope do these verses give us for enduring tough times?
4. These verses show us that sometimes when bad things happen, God is doing something within us.
  - a) How have you seen God at work while in the middle of difficult situations?
  - b) What difficult situation are you currently in the middle of that you are struggling to understand God's purpose?
  - c) What do you think God may be trying to do in your life as a result of the difficult circumstances you're facing?
  - d) In what ways has God reminded you that He is good and that He is in charge of your life?

## PRAYER POINT

Thank God for all the times you've seen Him at work in your life while in the middle of difficult circumstances. Pray for those you know who are questioning God's fairness. Ask God to comfort them.

## ACTION POINT

The Alpha Course is starting at the end of April. Start praying and asking God to highlight who you should invite.