

Good morning Union Church. My name is Kyle Rodriguez, and it's my privilege to get to open up the Word of God with you this morning. I spent much of June and July on paternity leave as my wife and I welcomed our new baby girl, Eleanor, and I am grateful to Pastor Ethan and the rest of Union Church for allowing me to do that.

Over my paternity leave, I got to spend a lot of time with my two-year-old, Judah, and during that time I began to teach him about death.

We have fun summers in our house.

No, I've been trying to teach about death (kind of) because it's a deterrent. The older he gets, the more mobile and independent he gets, the more we realize that danger is everywhere! Our house is a death trap! And I'm trying to explain to him why he has to stay away from the busy road in front of our house, why he can't put forks in the outlets, why he can't go out on the dock by himself at Kensington.

But the reality is that we can't really explain what it means to die to a two year old. All we can really say is that if he goes in the road and get hit by a car, he could get a really big boo-boo. And at the end of the day, that's really what we understand about death, isn't it? It's a kind of hurt, a kind of suffering, maybe the epitome of what it means to suffer.

And there is something deep inside us that longs to avoid suffering. Longs to avoid death.

This past year, I read a book on Christians and technology and the ways we can understand and utilize technology in light of God's plan for the world—it was a helpful book, by Tony Reinke.¹ But one of the things I was struck by in it was how much modern technological advancement and those who fund that advancement are focused on postponing and even avoiding death altogether. It's really focused on how we can, through medical advancement and even by technologically augmenting our bodies, reverse or prevent aging, maybe even death itself. And over the last ten years or so has become more and more widespread, especially amongst some of the wealthiest and most influential people and organizations in Silicon Valley, like Google and Jeff Bezos financing huge endeavors in this space.

We long to avoid death.

Or just think about the informal ways we try to ignore and push away death. Think about where we keep our aging and dying parents. At one point in history, they would have been cared for in their children's homes, but we put them in nursing homes. Instead of putting our cemeteries next to our churches, we burn our dead or put them in their own, secluded plots of land that can be easily avoided. The constant reminders of the reality of suffering and dying have gotten pushed into the margins, to the hidden away places.

¹ [*God, Technology, and the Christian Life* by Tony Reinke](#)

There is something in us that will do whatever it takes to avoid death and suffering. And it is a particular characteristic of our culture, which prioritizes instant gratification and lifts up “feeling happy” as the main point of life.

And it is easy for us to import that mindset onto Christianity. That is to say, Christianity can very easily be another tool for us to avoid suffering, to protect against death. Church becomes a place where my guilty feelings are smoothed over. Church friends become people that keep me from feeling alone. Prayer becomes a tool to ask God to take away our pain or guard us from it.

And it's not that those prayers are necessarily bad, or that Christianity doesn't come with real, tangible benefits. But what I want to press into today is that Christianity cannot merely be a tool for you to avoid suffering and death, because Christianity is a call to die.

This is our main point this morning: **The church of Jesus Christ is called and equipped to die.**

If you are a follower of Christ this morning, you are going to die. You are going to suffer. And that's not an accident. It's not an anomaly. Stephen's death was not an anomaly. Quite the contrary, in fact. Suffering, even unto death, is actually a part of the design. Stephen's death was not a one-off accident or a cautionary tale for the Christian church. Stephen's death was setting the pattern for the Christian church, following in the footsteps of his Lord.

Christians are called to die.

And while that is not the most happy-go-lucky, uplifting message you wanted to hear this morning, I hope that by the end of this morning, we'll see that this is actually very good news.

So, I want to ask two questions to kind of orient this sermon: *Why must we die?* If Jesus is the “bread of life” and has “the words of eternal life” and God is a good God, why must his people suffer and die? And if it's true that death and suffering are a part of the Christian life, then *how must we die?* How can we suffer and die well, in the way that God calls us to?

But before we dive into it, let's pray.

1. Why must we die?

Why must we die, that's where we're going to start. And we're going to start by looking at the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Why does Stephen die?

Well, there's two sides to that coin, a positive one and a negative one, if you want to think about it that way. The negative side is that Stephen dies because though Christ has come and gifted to him eternal life, Stephen still lives in a dangerous place.

In particular, Stephen lives in a **World that hates Jesus, which is run by Satan, who hates Jesus.**

Remember, Stephen isn't executed for breaking any laws. He's not tried and convicted as a revolutionary or a disturber of the peace. He's arrested, slandered, and eventually killed because he's proclaiming the name of Jesus.

You know, sometimes we have this sense that if we just act in all the right ways, or if we just knew the right nuanced apologetic arguments, then the world would rationally hear and see us and treat us accordingly.

It can be really easy to attribute the world's wrath toward the church to the "bad Christians" who give us a bad name. The ones who have been unloving and careless, who have drug Christianity into their culture wars and been hypocritical. And it can be really easy to see the world's anger toward the church and think: "Yeah, I get it. If only the Church would be more like Jesus!"

But brothers and sisters, do you know what would happen if someone came into our world and acted exactly, perfectly like Jesus? We don't have to guess!

Now, don't get me wrong, I am as frustrated as anybody when the Church fails, and fails hard. I am as frustrated in anyone at the ways that our hypocrisy hurts our witness. But the World's attitude toward Jesus's people is not rational (John 15:25). It is blind, prideful rage.

Remember what Jesus said to his disciples before he died, in John 15:

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

The New Testament is full of warnings—from both Jesus and the Apostles after him—about persecution, suffering, and even death to come, from both the World generally and Satan specifically. The Church is going to have to suffer and die again and again and again because the World and Satan hate Jesus.

But there is a positive side to this coin.

Because it's not as if the Church is down here on earth, suffering and dying at the hands of these great enemies, and God is somewhere up in heaven watching his people die down below with his hands tied behind his back.

No, the ultimate reason why the Church is called to die is because **God has designed it that way.**

Now, you might hear that and say: "Hold on! If this what Christianity is, just waiting around being miserable for 60, 70 years before God takes me out, then why even bother with it? What is the point of Christianity if it doesn't relieve my suffering, but just seems to make it worse, open me up to even more kinds of suffering? What happened to the God who loves me?"

But the thing you have to understand is that God did not design your salvation merely to keep you from suffering. He designed it to transform you. He did not save you to make you happy—in the shallow sense, the “pain-free” sense. He died to make you holy—in the deepest possible way.

I know not everybody here has raised kids, but all of us know that when raising young kids, you can't orient your parenting simply around keeping them from pain and hardship. Like, I love my son. I don't want him to hurt, I don't want him to be frustrated. I don't want him to fall. But if my entire parenting is revolved around keeping him from getting hurt, he would never grow. He would never learn how to walk and run and open doors and put his shoes on and eat food that isn't chopped up in to mush. The point of parenting isn't just to keep your kids from pain. It's to help them grow into something more.

And your salvation isn't meant merely to keep you from suffering, and even death. Your salvation is meant to turn you into something more—into the very image of Christ, God's Son. And as you become more and more like Christ, your life is going to take on a shape, a pattern much like his life did. You “re-enact”, in a way, the life of Christ in your own life.²

This is what Paul is talking about in Philippians 2, when he urges the Philippians to have the “mind of Christ”—a mind that is willing to suffer and die—he's talking about patterning our lives after the life of Christ. It's why Paul says in chapter 3 that he would count everything in this world as loss if he could know Christ, gain Christ, and “share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” To know Christ, to gain Christ, is, in part, to share in his death and suffering.

And so, when we suffer, one of the ways the Bible talks about our suffering is that **we are “participating” in Christ's suffering**. Because we have been united to Jesus by faith, our suffering becomes his suffering, his suffering becomes ours, and our death becomes his, his death becomes ours.

By suffering in his name, we identify with him. He is ours and we are his. It's not that our suffering makes us worthy to be Christians, or we earn our place in God's kingdom by suffering enough. It's the reverse. Our suffering in Christ's name is a sign that he has made us his!

And we see a hint of that here, I think. There are numerous examples here of Stephen's similarities to Jesus, of course: He's doing miracles like Jesus, filled with the Spirit of Jesus, his opponents can't withstand his speech, his rebuke of them is remarkably similar to Jesus's rebukes of the Jewish leaders. He's slandered like Jesus was, with false witnesses accusing him of almost the exact same things as they accused Jesus of. Stephen truly is sharing in Christ's sufferings.

But look at what happens when Stephen finally sees Jesus. Look in verse 55, right before Stephen is finally killed.

² See Paul E. Miller's work on “the J-Curve”, which can be introduced here: <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-j-curve/>.

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

The fact that Stephen is given a vision into heaven, into God's very glory, is remarkable in and of itself, a sign of his godliness and rightness.

But something is unique here. Every time the New Testament talks about Jesus after he has ascended to heaven, it describes him as sitting at the right hand of God. He is seated at the right hand, taking his throne and his rightful position as judge and king over all the universe.

But when Stephen sees him, he is not sitting, but standing! He is not merely sitting, judging this entire sham-trial impartially, but he is standing, for he is advocating for Stephen. He has not only judged Stephen and ruled in his favor, but he has stood up to be his advocate, his witness, his defense lawyer. He is vindicated—because he is Christ's, and Christ is his.³

This is why, earlier in Acts, the apostles rejoiced that they were “counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” of Jesus. Because it is confirmation to them: our suffering in Christ's name—making his suffering our own—is proof that he has made us his own.

But our suffering in the name of Jesus is also doing something else.

It's serving a real, practical purpose, because in God's plan, **suffering and dying actually work to transform us.**

Think about how the New Testament authors talk about the value of suffering:

Romans 5:3-4 – “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope”

James 1:2-4 – “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

It is through suffering, dying, that God actually is making something new out of us.

And that's exactly what's happening here in the story of Stephen. Remember what Jesus said to apostles at the beginning of Acts? Remember his task for them? Go and be my witnesses **“in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, and all the ends of the earth”** (Acts 1:8). But up to this point in Acts, we haven't seen the church leave Jerusalem!

But look at the very beginning of Chapter 8 with me: **“And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the**

³ There are different interpretations of Christ's standing in this vision, but I think this is the most compelling one. It is well illustrated in the following commentary: Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 312.

regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” It’s only now, after the death of Stephen, that a massive turning point in the history of the Church happens as the church is scattered out, beyond the walls of Jerusalem—and over the next few weeks we’ll see this turning point have massive implications as the gospel goes to brand new places and peoples.

But it is only through the death of Stephen, and the persecution of the church, that this happens. It is through suffering and death that the church becomes what she was meant to be: not a Jerusalem-centric religion of the apostles, but a worldwide global church of people from every tribe and tongue on mission. From death comes new life. The church only grows by dying.

So, you have to know, that when you suffer, it’s not meaningless. God is doing something in you. He’s not content to let you be an infant in his kingdom forever. He wants to see you walk and run and feed yourselves, and tie your shoes. He wants to see you grow up into the very image of his son.

But there is also another kind of death that transforms us, and that is **death of our sin**.

It’s not a coincidence that violent words like “die” and “kill” are used repeatedly in the New Testament to describe what happens to us as we become more like Jesus.

Colossians 3:5 - “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”

Romans 6:11 – “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Romans 8:13 – “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

1 Peter 2:24 – “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

To become more and more like Jesus is to violently kill the most selfish inclinations of our heart. And it absolutely can feel like dying.

It can feel like dying, like an addict feels like he’s dying when the withdrawal symptoms hit. It can feel like dying to give up some of our strongest desires. It can feel like dying to remove ourselves from the center of the universe.

You see, it doesn’t just feel like dying, it *is* dying. You and I—without God—are incredibly selfish people. If you don’t believe that about yourself, none of this is ever going to make sense to you. We are incredibly selfish people, everything we do is done out of some kind of selfish motivation, even what looks like the most charitable, selfless act on the outside is actually motivated by completely selfish motivations. Sin isn’t just a part of who we are, it has corrupted everything about us. But most of us, even a lot of us Christians, don’t think that way. We don’t see our natural selves as really all that bad.

C.S. Lewis explained it like this: He said, most of us, when we think about moral improvement, think about a few different pieces of ourselves that are bad. A few different rooms in the house of our souls that need to be cleaned out. And we really do feel like those rooms need to be cleaned out, we feel the pull of morality, we know that we can't just leave those rooms a dirty mess forever. And most of us know that it is going to cost something to get those rooms cleaned up. But we hope that after we pay the cost to clean up those rooms, we'll essentially have enough money left over to do what we want with the rest of our house.

Ultimately, our natural selves want control. We feel like we should be able to do what we want, when we want, as long as it doesn't really muck things up.

But the thing you don't understand is that the house has termites, and they're in every room. And every time you try to clean up one room, you unearth another problem. And another problem and another problem. Lewis says, eventually, you'll either be miserable, or you'll give up trying to be good altogether.

The way to become more like Jesus isn't merely to ask him to fix the most glaringly obvious sins in your life. The way to become more like Jesus is to ask him to knock the old house down and build a brand new one—one in which he has total authority to design in his image.

Lewis imagines Jesus saying this:

“Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. ... Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.”⁴

This is the whole part and parcel of the Christian life: Killing our natural selves, offering it all to Christ, and asking him to rebuild the house. It is a kind of dying, but it is a dying that results in resurrection.

So, brothers and sisters, do not be surprised by suffering—either by unasked for storms in this life or by the realization of your own sin. Both will feel like death. But they are doing something to you. They are emptying you of the old self, that Christ might pour himself in and make you into something greater.

2. How can we die well?

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Zondervan, 2001), p. 196.

Okay, so if this is true, that suffering and dying—dying completely and finally one day and dying thousands of “mini-deaths” along the way—really are an unavoidable part of the Christian life, then how do we do it well? How do we do it in such a way that God intended, without it breaking us?

That’s where I want to end today.

And I think there is quite a bit we could learn from Stephen here. We can see in him that it’s only by being filled with the Spirit that we can have a kind of bold endurance of evil, even unto death—we can’t do it by our own power. We can see in him that really following the pattern of Jesus’s life includes mimicking not only the actions of Christ but the heart of Christ, allowing us to be gracious and forgiving in the face of suffering, instead of indignant and vengeful.

But I think the one thing I want to make sure I press into you this morning is this: To die well, day after day, Christians must have their eyes fixed on the person of Jesus Christ. It is the vision of Jesus that allows Stephen to press through to his death. Because seeing Jesus expands Stephen’s vision of reality.

Only by seeing Jesus can you see your suffering in the big picture of what it’s doing—and have trust that it really will accomplish the good that God has designed in it. But when we’re in the midst of suffering, it’s near-impossible to have a wide vision.

Suffering naturally produces tunnel vision. All we can do is fixate on our situation and obsess over how to get out of it. You know this. If you’ve ever gone through significant depression, you know that it’s almost impossible to think about anything other than the fact that you are depressed. If you lose your life savings and start living paycheck to paycheck, all you can think about is the fact that money is tight. If you get a terminal diagnoses, you start seeing all of life through the lens of your impending death.

Suffering naturally gives us tunnel vision. But seeing Jesus widens our perspective.

Because when we see Jesus, our suffering is no longer the center of the story. Jesus is the center of the story, and our suffering and even death itself takes its rightful place as a side character, a plot device, on the way to the stories resolution.

So, I guess what you really need you ask yourself this morning is: have you seen Jesus? Not necessarily physically, but *do you know him*? Have you seen him for who he is?

Have you seen him in all his mighty power--enough to level empires and raise up mountains--and know that he is powerful enough to use your suffering, even that caused by the greatest enemy, for good?

Have you seen him in all his steadfast love, a well deep enough to draw from again and again, a depth that will always dwarf the depth of your failure--and know that he sees you in your dying and loves you in the midst of it?

Have you seen him in all his stunning, beautiful glory, a totally all-satisfying reality that makes the greatest treasure of this world shrivel in comparison--and know that any amount of suffering in this world cannot compare to the weight of joy that is being prepared for you when you enter his glory?

Have you seen Jesus? Only a grand, glorious vision of the risen Jesus, reigning over Creation with scars on his hands and love in his eyes, only that vision can ground a faith that is willing to die. If you are trying to ground your faith on the circumstances of your life, on your strength of will, it will crumble at the face of death. But if you have seen Jesus, you will have a faith that is ready and willing to suffer, and even die.

And this, practically, means that this sermon is for everybody in this room, whether you're in the midst of suffering now or not.

Because whether you know it or not, deep suffering, that feels like dying, is coming your way. Everybody who follows Jesus is either in the midst of suffering or is preparing to suffer.

In the late 1800s, there lived a man in Chicago named Horatio Spafford. He was a lawyer, a well-respected member of his church, with a wife and three daughters. Horatio had been involved in the abolitionist movement around Chicago, he and his wife regularly hosted groups and evangelists in their home. They loved the Lord, but they had built a rather successful, comfortable life.

And in 1871, Spafford took much of his well-earned savings and invested it in real estate in the north side of Chicago—seemingly a wise investment in the growing city. But just six months later, the Great Fire of Chicago destroyed essentially all of his investment. It almost ruined him.

But it didn't ruin him. The Spafford family built its life back up. They had another daughter, they built their savings back up. And two years later, the family planned a trip to Europe.

At the last minute, Horatio had a few business items come up, and he sent his wife, Anna, and their four daughters—between the ages of 18 months and 12 years old—on a ship ahead of him, planning on joining them several weeks later.

But as the ship sailed across the Atlantic, it collided with another ship, nearly split in two and sunk in less than 12 minutes. Over 200 passengers and crew perished—including all four of the Spafford daughters. Nine days after the wreck, Anna finally landed in Wales and sent a telegram back home to Spafford that said: "Saved alone. What shall I do?"

Hearing the news, Spafford immediately left to meet his wife. I can't imagine what that trip must have been like. And as they sailed over the spot where his daughters had drowned, over the spot where somewhere below, their bodies lay, the captain told Spafford, this is the spot. And it was in that moment that Horatio Spafford took a pen and a piece of paper and wrote:

When peace like a river, attendeth my way

When sorrows like sea billows roll

Whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say

It is well, it is well with my soul

It has been 150 years, this year, since that hymn was written. It is my favorite hymn, Ethan led us in it at our wedding.

Brothers and sisters, the only way Spafford could write that, and the only way we can sing it, is because the gospel was implanted deep in his soul. He had looked at Jesus!

So, I guess what you really need to ask yourself this morning is: have you seen Jesus?

Have you seen him in all his mighty power--enough to level empires and raise up mountains--and know that he is powerful enough to use your suffering, even that caused by the greatest enemy, for good?

Have you seen him in all his steadfast love, a well deep enough to draw from again and again, a depth that will always dwarf the depth of your failure--and know that he sees you in your dying and loves you in the midst of it?

Have you seen him in all his stunning, beautiful glory, a totally all-satisfying reality that makes the greatest treasure of this world shrivel in comparison--and know that any amount of suffering in this world cannot compare to the weight of joy that is being prepared for you when you enter his glory?

Have you seen Jesus? Because only a grand, glorious vision of the risen Jesus, reigning over Creation with scars on his hands and love in his eyes, only that vision can ground a faith that is willing to die. If you are trying to ground your faith on the circumstances of your life, on your strength of will, it will crumble at the face of death.