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To Live is Christ

COMPELLED: The Joy and Simplicity of Introducing People to Jesus Series

Philippians 1:12-23

Pastor Bryan Clark

Many of you should have received an email from me this week on behalf of the board of elders, giving you a little bit of an update on my transition and some leadership changes here. If you didn't get that, there are copies of it at the information centers. But we want to talk about that a little bit this morning. So, a year ago we laid out a plan for my transition as senior pastor—so just a couple of details related to that.

Probably the most common comment I've had over the last year is, "I hear you're retiring," and I just want to clarify: I have never used that term. As a matter of fact, a year ago I tried to be clear; apparently I wasn't, but for me this has never been about retirement. I'm not thinking about that; I'm not interested in that. I'm not worn out…I'm not burned out…I'm not stressed out. What it does have to do with is: over the years I've seen far too many senior pastors stay too long—much to the detriment of the church—and I just don't want to be that guy. And so I'm the one who initiated the conversation and last year, a year ago, we laid out a transition plan. Jeff Peterson headed up the search team and I would say we worked it really hard. About a year later, not quite, one of the things we had to wrestle with is it became obvious we haven't had even a whisper of a conversation with someone who we think would be a good candidate to take the role. Now to clarify what I mean by that, I'm not saying we didn't have applicants. We had over 250 applicants. We also pursued a lot of people that we thought could be possible candidates, so I know some people are going to say maybe it was the transition plan, and maybe we need to tweak this and tweak that. But it's important to understand that really isn't it; we didn't even get into those conversations. At some point we had to wrestle with the question, "What is God saying?" One of the most common questions I get asked as a pastor is, "How do you determine the will of God?" That's a really good question; it's not an easy question to answer. When you're making significant life choices, there's no formula; there's no checklist; there's no writing in the sky. Sometimes all you can do is your own due diligence—do your best to move forward—but you have to be sensitive and open to what God might say along the way. I suppose we can put our heads down and press forward and say, "We're going to do it this way no matter what," but I think that would be a mistake. When I came—and that's literally the only senior pastor transition in our history of the church—it's helpful to remember *nothing* went according to plan—*nothing*! And we've known that; we've talked about the fact that we have to do our best to plan and to pray, but the results—how it actually comes to pass—is up to God. So one of the things we wrestled with is, "So what is God saying?" And our conclusion was, "It just seems perhaps the transition is premature; God's not ready for that yet." So for me personally, it'd be really important for people to understand that I feel like for a year I held this position in an open hand, and if at any time God brought forward the next senior pastor, then I was fine with that. We would do the transition and move on. But that's just simply not what happened. And so right now I'm going to remain in the position of senior pastor for a few more years. (*Applause and Cheering)* (*"*Oh you're very nice.")

However, in seeking to be consistent with our value of continuing to grow younger as a church, one of the things we talked about is the need to change some leadership things internally. Maybe what God is saying is we need to strengthen some things internally with some younger leaders so when

it's time for my position to change, it won't be so much change all at once. So, if you don't know this, the team that runs the day-to-day ministry for Lincoln Berean is called the Staff Directional Team. Sometime we refer to them as the Senior Team, and that team has been Mark Kremer, Tim Bohlke, Jeff Peterson and myself. Now this is a great team—I love these guys—and we have done a lot of ministry together and God's done amazing things. We have a lot to celebrate. But at some point it becomes necessary to make changes in order for younger leaders to move forward and to begin to have more significant leadership roles. So that directional team met for weeks and we concluded that we thought it was best that three of us, Tim, Mark and myself, step off that leadership team, step off the directional team in order to make room for some of these younger leaders to run the day-to-day ministry of Lincoln Berean. It's really important to understand it's not a board of elders who are moving us out to the fringe. It was our decision; this is what we feel is best for Lincoln Berean. So, Tim and Mark will remain on staff; there's plenty of work to do—that won't be a problem—but in terms of running the day-to-day ministry of the church, we have turned the keys to the bus over to these new guys who will be the new Staff Directional Team. Jeff Peterson is about ten years younger and he will stay on that team in order to create continuity. It's pretty complex, so continuity from the former team (we're trying to be careful with the language; it's not the *old* team; it's the *former* team - *laughter*) as we transition to this *new* team. I'd like you to meet them and their families:

> ***Dave Harris*** *and his wife Jackie,* ***Mike Stelzer*** *and his wife Katie,* ***Ryan Harmon*** *and his wife Jenee',* ***Josh Luse*** *and his wife Julie,* ***Jeff Peterson*** *and his wife Cynci.*

These are great, godly men of integrity. We're really excited about them, and we're excited to see them take this position of leadership and continue to move the church forward. So this is really a great occasion for us.

So, whenever we have these discussions as leaders, the thing that it always comes back to is the mission of the church and what it is we need to do to be effective in accomplishing the mission. Our mission statement is, "To glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ." A critical component of that has to do with our responsibility to be stewards of the gospel—to reach out to people next door, people we work with, people we go to school with, people around our community and around the world with the gospel. And that's what we want to talk about this morning and over the next couple of weeks. So, if you have a Bible, turn with us to Philippians, Chapter 1, verse 12. Paul says:

> **Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel**, (*NASB, Philippians 1:12)

When Paul opens that with the statement, **Now I want you to know**, the Greek has the flavor of a correction. In other words, the Philippian church has a misunderstanding, a misperception about Paul's circumstances and what's happening, so Paul wants to bring a correction to that. When talking about **circumstances**, it's helpful to describe what we mean by that. So, Paul planted the church in Philippi, and if you remember the story in Acts 16 of the Philippian jailer, that's the moment where the church in Philippi was planted. Paul leaves Philippi, goes to Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem he is arrested. He is sent to Caesarea where he spends two years in jail. As a Roman citizen, he has the right to appeal to Rome, which he does, and Rome accepts the appeal. So Paul gets on a ship headed to Rome, but partway along the journey they encounter a tremendous storm. The ship is wrecked, busted into pieces and destroyed, and really, miraculously, the people survive and end up on the island of Malta. On the island of Malta, Paul is picking up sticks in order to build

a campfire, and out of the sticks comes a poisonous snake and it bites him. But he doesn't die. They remain stranded for three months until another ship arrives, and they eventually make it to Rome. So Paul is now in a Roman prison and he is awaiting either execution or release. The theme of the book of Philippians is *Joy*, so it's really helpful to understand the context. All that Paul has been through, and now he's sitting in a Roman prison but what he's writing about is his *joyful heart*. In terms of the circumstances, it would be very easy for Paul to have a pity party, for Paul to think, "What's the deal?" He's worked so hard to be faithful to his calling. He is the premier church planter. From a human point of view, what sense does it make to have this great church planter in a jail in Caesarea for two years—two years that he could have been out planting churches? We would think, "Come on, God, what are you doing? Bust him out! You've done it before. Get him out! You did it in Philippi." But He leaves him there for two years and then you have the shipwreck, the snake bite, and now he's sitting in a Roman prison. Paul could have been thinking, "God, is this the deal? I try to be faithful; I try to do what you call me to do, and this is the thanks I get?" Probably many of us would find ourselves in that frame of mind: "Gonna have a little pity party in a Roman prison." That's exactly the struggle that the Philippians, the first readers, are having. They're thinking, "If the message Paul proclaimed is true and if God is on Paul's side, if Paul has favor with God, why would all this bad stuff be happening? Why wouldn't God take better care of Paul?" So that's what Paul is seeking to correct.

This is the particular passage where we first introduced the concept of the cruise ship and the battleship years ago. The idea is this: If you're boarding a cruise ship, you have a certain frame of mind. You're on vacation. You're thinking about the buffet. You're thinking about all the places you're going to stop. You're thinking about the gift shop. You're thinking about the swimming pool and the hot tub. That's the frame of mind you're in. Think how different that is when you're boarding a battleship. When you're boarding a battleship, you're not thinking about the buffet. You're thinking about whether you're going to live or die! You're thinking about whether or not you're even going to come back! You're thinking about what the mission is and what your assignment is to the mission. You're in a completely different frame of mind. This is war! The big problem is when you think you're boarding a cruise ship, but you're actually boarding a battleship. This is where we get into trouble as Christians. All of a sudden we get on the battleship, and we're confused! "I can't find the buffet! I can't find the pool! I can't even find the gift shop and now people are shooting at us"—and all this is confusing! "Wait a minute. I thought I boarded the love boat." Maybe when someone presented the gospel to you, they suggested that if you trust Jesus as Savior, it will be a lifelong ride on the love boat. But that is not what the Bible teaches. The New Testament is full of military metaphors that describe the Christian life, and that's exactly what Paul is talking about.

The Philippians are thinking, "Wait a minute; I thought Paul was supposed to be on a cruise ship," and Paul is saying, "Wait a minute; I need to correct your perception; I need to correct your misunderstanding." Actually, all these circumstances have enabled the gospel to go forth. As a matter of fact, when he says, …**have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel,** that Greek word translated **greater progress** is a military term. It was used to describe an engineer whose assignment was to go out ahead of the army and clear away any obstacles, any things in the way, so that the army could flow in. So, he's saying all these circumstances are what God has used to advance the gospel. Specifically verse 13:

> **So that my imprisonment in *the cause of* Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice.**
>
> **Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but *that* with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.** (Vs.13-20)

Now when he utters those words **by life or by death**, he is not a pastor in Lincoln, Nebraska, just making such a comment. He is in a Roman prison cell and he is awaiting word as to whether he will be executed or released. Those words are filled with intensity for Paul. He doesn't know whether he will live or die, but he rejoices because the gospel is going forward. He says what's happened is, as a result of being placed in this Roman prison, he has access to the praetorian guards. This would be like the elite soldiers of the Roman Empire, like maybe Navy Seals or Army Rangers, something like that today. There probably would have been two of them chained to Paul and they would have been on six-hour shifts. So every six hours he gets two more, and Paul is realizing, "I have amazing access to these elite soldiers!" I mean there's nowhere they can go; they're chained to Paul! So, it's this incredible opportunity to present the gospel. Because Paul is actually joyful, because he's *rejoicing*, because he's willing to die for the cause of Christ, these soldiers have to sit up and take notice. It gives the message tremendous credibility. It's very similar to the dynamics in Act 16 with the Philippian jailor. Rather than Paul and Silas feeling sorry for themselves, they're singing great hymns of worship and the prisoners and the prison guard had to process, "What's going on here?" It's exactly what's happening here. He says these elite soldiers are coming to Christ and then they're influencing others who are coming to Christ. And what is giving the gospel great credibility is the very fact that he's in prison for the cause of Christ and willing to die for what he knows is true. He acknowledges the fact that there are those out there preaching this message with selfish motives, even to the degree of wanting to do Paul harm. There are also those out there preaching the message with the best of motives, but what he essentially says is, "I can't do anything about that." But he still rejoices in the fact that the message of the gospel is going forth. So Paul views all of his circumstances through this lens of: *how might this advance the gospel*? The core, then, of Paul's theology on this is verse 21:

> **For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I *am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose.** (Vs. 21-22)

So, Paul's operating system is **to live is Christ** and that means more **fruitful labor**—more churches planted, more advance of the gospel. But**, to die is gain.** To die is to be in the presence of Jesus and that has great appeal to him. This whole concept of living and dying is really different for people who are persecuted, really different for people that are suffering, really different for people who have been beat up and tortured for the sake of the gospel. They are diligent to do everything they are called to do to accomplish the mission but to get to the end of their journey, to run their race and to enter the presence of Jesus has tremendous relief for that part of the story to be over.

That's really different from how we process some of these conversations as twenty-first century Americans. When we say, **"To live** would be better," we're not necessarily saying, "in order that I might advance the gospel." We tend to be thinking, "God, I'm not ready to die yet because the cruise isn't over. I want a few more turns at the buffet. I want more time in the pool. I want a few more times at the gift shop. There's a few more cruises I want to take." When we're processing questions of life and death, we're saying, "I'm not ready to die; I've got more cruises to take." That's really different from Paul's perspective that, *"If I live, it means more fruitful labor to advance the gospel."* If you go back and read Paul's story, it means more times to get beat up…more time for lashes…more time for prison…more time for suffering, but he rejoices in all that if it's advancing the gospel. He goes on in verse 23:

> **But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better;**

So Paul is all in for the sake of the gospel, and when he finishes his course, he's ready to be in the presence of Jesus, and he understands that will be **much better** than his story has been on earth. Now if you come to grips with what Paul is saying, it can be life changing. When we think the Christian life should be a cruise or a season on the love boat, then we're confused with everything that happens that isn't consistent with that. "Why are people shooting at us?" "Why am I going through all this suffering?" "Why is all this stuff happening to me?" And so we're trying to figure out what the deal is. "You know, God, I've tried to be a really good Christian, I've tried to do my part, and this is the thanks I get? It all feels so unfair."

The difference would be a mindset where I view all of my circumstances through this grid of how might God use this in my life to help advance the gospel. "How might God use this suffering?" "How might God use this disease?" "How might God use this disappointment?" "How might God use this job?" "How might He use this talent?" "How might He use this hobby?" "How might He use this success?" "How might He use these relationships?" Everything is run through the grid of, "How might God use *this* to give credibility to the gospel, to advance the cause of Christ? *To live is Christ because that means more fruitful labor.*

These are the things that we want to talk about over the next few weeks. So let me just cover a couple of points as I wrap this up. The first one is: what I don't want you to hear is you need to add a whole bunch more stuff to your schedule. People are busy and the last thing you want is more busyness. That's not what we're saying. It's not so much that you need to do something different, as it is you need to *think differently* about what you're already doing. You're already going to work. You're already living in a neighborhood. You're already engaged in your hobbies. You're already going to school. There are lots of things you're already doing. You don't need to do something different so much as to *think differently* about what you're already doing.

The other part of it is rethinking methodology. So when I say words like, "Share the gospel," "Present the gospel," "Be a steward of the gospel," what are you hearing? Some of you already have kind of this uneasy feeling in your gut and you're like, "Oh no." Here's what most of you are hearing: you memorize a presentation; you figure out a way to get your foot in the door; you lay it on them, then you close the deal. And honestly, most people won't do that, and when you read through the gospels and when you read through the book of Acts, you really don't see that done.

So, think of it like this: if that's your methodology, when was the last time you actually shared the gospel with someone? Has it been a year? Two years? Five years? Ten years? Twenty years? Here's

what I would suggest. If it's been quite a while, *your method is not working*, right? So, here's the deal: can we *rethink* how we're doing this. If what you're thinking is necessary to present the gospel isn't working, then let's *rethink* this.

Now what we're not going to do is try to motivate you with shame and guilt. We're not going to tell you stories of hell and the fires of hell and people hanging over hell. How could you not care about that? And if we lay enough shame and guilt on you, certainly that will motivate you to do what apparently you don't want to do. We're not going to do that. We're going to start with an assumption that I think is correct, and that is, "Most people in the room, you do genuinely care. I know you care. I know the people of Lincoln Berean. I see it in your life all the time. You do care. You care about the people you go to school with, you care about the people that live next door, you care about the people at work, you care about the people you do hobbies with. You do care: we believe that." So, what we need to do is try to change the methodology. What I would suggest is to make it possible for you to actually do what's already in your heart. You want the people around you to come to know Jesus. I believe that. So, let us help; let us help make that possible.

One of the tools that we're going to use over the next few weeks is a book called *42 Seconds*. They are free—one book per family—and here's what we want you to do with it. It's not a book to take home and just read right through. It's a very easy read. But rather, the book is divided into four sections. Each section has five simple, short chapters. They're more like devotional readings. But the purpose is to get you to begin to process a different way of engaging people that is much more consistent with what I think is in your heart. So next week, just read section one. There are five chapters; read it devotionally—one chapter a day—but then *think about* and *try doing* what's in the chapter. It will make sense; I think it will be an easy outflow. It's the thing you actually want to do with the people around you. So read one chapter a day; basically engage in that, and then each week we'll talk about that. We really want to try to rethink methodology and to release an army of people that are better equipped to care for the people around them, to engage in meaningful conversations that will lead to opportunities to share about Jesus.

Our Father, we are so thankful and sobered by the responsibility of being made stewards of the life-changing methods of the gospel. Lord, I do believe the majority of people here this morning, they care about the people around them; they do want the people around them to know Jesus. So, Lord, give us open, creative minds to rethink how we do this in order that we might be more effective stewards of the gospel, that we might be faithful to accomplish the mission. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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