

July 16, 2017

To My Grace Baptist Church Family,

I am coming to you today to deliver a word that I had hoped and prayed I would not ever have to speak. On the evening of December 13, 2016, the pastoral search team of Grace Baptist Church contacted me to inform me that I was the unanimous final candidate to be presented to the church as their next senior pastor. This phone call was the culmination of a journey that, for the Crawfords, began 8 months previous when my name had first been presented for consideration. I had allowed my name to be submitted out of a sincere desire to always be open to God's will, but also with the reality that I was very happy and thriving in my ministry at Cross Church in Northwest Arkansas.

I simply assumed that if it was not God's will that I should be the next senior pastor of Grace, the committee at some point would eliminate me from consideration. We prayed daily for months that if this were not God's will, that He would indeed close the door with the committee, and they would go another direction. As the search team narrowed its list of candidates and I remained on that list, we held matters very loosely in our hearts and were honest with the search team about this. But when the call came on that December night, Julie and I knew we had crossed into a new phase of the journey where the "ball was in our court." I will tell you that while both of us were very excited about the prospect of becoming the next senior pastor of Grace, we both also carried a sense of unease – something we struggled to define and deal with.

Our thoughts were that we needed to just "go to the next step" and then we would "know." So, we came for a secret, incognito - type visit to Knoxville and the church. That visit was significant for us in two ways. First, we were just so impressed with Grace Baptist Church and the scope of its impact and potential for future growth and ministry. But second, our sense of unease remained, and this left Julie and I so puzzled. As we sorted it out, we chalked it up to just being nervous about the scope of such a move for our family at this season of life that we have now found ourselves in. In addition, I have spent 20 years of my ministry in one region of the country and have raised our four children in that same region. So, to us, it made sense that we would have difficult thoughts that were hard to process.

On our incognito visit, we had the opportunity to meet the staff and their wives, and we began to instantly feel loved and fully embraced. This too overwhelmed us. As Julie and I talked and prayed we could not escape the thought of, "Who in their right mind would ever say 'no' to such an opportunity as to pastor Grace Baptist Church?" The church had been reaffirmed to us in multiple ways by multiple people. I was told that Grace would literally be a "dream ministry" for the next pastor. That the church was just "waiting to explode." Nothing but positive words and sentiments flooded our way when it came to who Grace is and where God had it for her to go.

Once again, Julie and I pushed through the unease we felt. And so, as you know, we came in view of a call. The call and the vote was overwhelming. We said yes...and this began the journey to unplug from our lives and ministry in Northwest Arkansas. This unplugging process was far more painful and difficult than I would ever have imagined it could be – for all of us in our family. We loved our place of ministry at Cross Church. We loved our lives and impact and what the future would have held. And we loved, loved, loved the people that we ministered with and to. So, walking away was a step that tore our hearts. It made settling into our new lives in Knoxville incredibly challenging. Once again on a level that we had not anticipated. Yes, we knew it would be hard. Yes, we knew it would take time. We were ready for "hard" if this was where God wanted us, and we were ready to give it time.

Let me say at this point how wonderful this church was and has been to our family. Literally, from the moment we pulled up to our temporary apartment where we were met by a score of church members so glad to see us and welcome us with hugs and to unload our cars and trailer. The outpouring of love and support from this church has not stopped and has been over-the-top extraordinary. Cards, gifts, invitations for dinners, hugs and prayers, endless words of encouragement, asking how I am doing, how Julie and the kids are doing. Rarely have I experienced love on this level. And so WHY did Julie and I continue to feel ill-at-ease? Why a growing and not lessening of these feelings? Yes, we were homesick. And we can power through homesickness if that's all it is. But we were beginning to feel that something much more than mere homesickness was at play.

Out of a desperate desire to settle our hearts and start an upward path, we continued to take steps forward, assuming the feelings of peace would begin to come. And that...that is the key word in the equation. Peace. After many weeks of service as your pastor, these nebulous, unidentifiable feelings finally had definition – a lack of...peace. THIS is what we had missed from the moment that call came in December. This is what we had desperately been seeking as we took each step forward. And this is what has not come to us, no matter what steps we have taken.

At this point it is hard for me to describe to you with words the depth of our struggle. We have shed tears these many weeks and now months. In our private moments, it has been agony. We have done all we know how to do to “fit” into a new life in Knoxville. In our desperation, we even made the commitment to buy a house and tie ourselves to a mortgage. Our thinking the whole time being that we would never feel at home and have the peace we were seeking as long as our belongings were in Arkansas and we had no place for us and our children to truly call home. Yet even in this, the peace did not come and a sense of wrongness grew.

And so, we continued to pray. To seek the face of God. To beg God to speak and grant us peace. The notion that I had made a mistake or “missed it” was simply unthinkable for me personally or for my thoughts toward this great church. I reached out to a very small network of brothers who could pray for me and speak in to me with wisdom. I have followed their advice and the further I have walked this road the more agitated I have become in my spirit.

Let me be very frank and honest with my next comments. I have grown to feel that literally the life I am living as your pastor is a life that belongs to someone else. When I sit in my office it feels like I am sitting in someone else's chair. The house I live in feels like it belongs to another. The love and blessings poured on us generously by this church literally feel like they should be directed to another man. I have not felt like truly myself since I came to be your pastor. I have not felt like, as great a church as you are, that I am the man called to shepherd you. This has led to tremendous guilt, and to be blunt, an impasse. In all my praying and seeking of God, I have begged Him to speak with clarity and to cut through the fog as light splitting open the darkness. For months, He has been silent... until most recently.

The clarity came, and it came to me and Julie on the same day and at the same time. And this is the hard clarity of the moment. A mistake has been made. I should not be here. This life and this church and this ministry is meant by God for another man of God. I know this is very difficult for you to hear. Believe me when I say that these are among the most difficult words I have ever uttered. We have received nothing but verbal affirmation from the membership of the church - that people are “so glad that we are here,” and that “it is so clear that I am the man for Grace.” But I am convinced that while many believe this, that what this really indicates is how ready this church is for God's truly called man. With certainty I can say that I am

not that man. I know that now. And I am so very, very sorry. I am sorry for the pain and the confusion this creates in the short term.

Could I stay and be your pastor? Yes. Could I eventually be happy here? Yes. Would the church do well under my leadership for however long? I believe so. But hear me clearly...if I am not God's truly called man, then that means there is another man that SHOULD be here. And however well the church may do if I stay, it will go to places only God can take you under his leadership. You may only realize this when he is here instead of me. I would be doing the church an even greater disservice if I were to stay for any length of time. Therefore, I cannot stay. I am compelled to go. And so, effective today, I regretfully but with God given peace resign as the senior pastor of Grace Baptist Church.

I want to be clear about four specific things:

(1) **My marriage is strong.** Julie and I are together on this, as difficult as it is. We just celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary and our hearts are more knit together than ever before.

(2) **My children are good and not in crisis.** While my family may not be present here this morning because of the pain of this moment, we are fully unified as we take this step together.

(3) **My life is committed to integrity.** Nothing immoral, unethical or illegal has been perpetrated. I simply do not belong and should not have ever entered your life. For this I can only beg your forgiveness. Yet please understand, it is my own personal integrity that calls me to be honest with you and make this difficult decision known to you today.

(4) **This is the most humbling moment of my ministry.** I am truly sorry. While I do not expect full understanding or forgiveness today, I pray that the balm of time will provide for the church the same sense of holy peace to which I have come.

So, what will be my next step? When I came to the place where I realized I must leave Grace, I reached out to Pastor Ronnie Floyd and other leaders at Cross Church. I asked them if there might be an open door for me to return to Cross Church. They have agreed and I will be transitioning back to the place where I have spent more than a decade of my life. I will be returning to oversee the five campuses and ministries of Cross Church as the Lead Pastor of Ministries, Teaching Pastor. For this I am extremely grateful and it is more than I deserve.

Because of the extraordinary nature of this moment, my transition will happen quickly, by the middle of this week, so that I can begin to again walk in obedience to the Lord, and this great church can move forward in finding God's man for her. I would humbly request that there be no attempts made to engage me to "change my mind." I am certain in these matters and at perfect peace with God. That peace has not come without a heavy price. A price I am now paying and will pay for some time.

I have two final comments. First, to the man who should be here and who will one day, hopefully soon, become the next God-called senior pastor of Grace Baptist Church. This truly is a great church. Everything you have heard about the goodness and the potential for this church is true. It is a miracle church and the real miracle of God lies in its future. Please do not for a moment think or believe that what has happened as it relates to me reflects in any way poorly on this wonderful church. When God calls...come. Give your heart and life to this church and the people of East Tennessee, and let God take you to do great and mighty things for the Kingdom.

Second, and finally. To Grace Baptist Church. To the people of this great church. Yes, you are a great church. You have loved the Crawfords more than we deserve. And we will forever be grateful. If love and affection could keep us here, we would be here forever – you are THAT wonderful. As the fire of this wound burns hot, I have no idea what God will do with it, but I have faith and I believe, with no doubts, that God will take this journey we have walked together these few short months and bring good from it. Know this: while I was with you, maybe not in heart, but certainly in spirit and flesh, I pastored you with all my knowledge and experience doing the very best I could for this church as if I was the called man of God. I only pray that in some small measure I leave the church better than when I came. Have dreams been crushed today? Maybe. But only for a season. Because together we did dream. Great dreams. And God did move. That is because He is NOT done with Grace, and the greatest future and dreams of and for Grace are right in front of you. It was never about Jeff Crawford. I am but a flawed man, which you all know too well to now be true. The church was never mine. It was always God's. And Jesus is its chief shepherd. Now, I exhort you go and re-enter that season of searching and find God's man to lead under the headship of Jesus. I love you Grace and will always be grateful for this short season that you entered my life.

Pastor Jeff Crawford