

The Gospel – Report About LifeWise in Emporia

Introduction

Good morning, everyone. It is a blessing for me to be here, and I hope it will be a blessing for you that I am here. Mac reached out and asked me to share about some of the things happening in Emporia. One of them, which most of you may already know about, is a program we have called LifeWise Academy. It is an outreach to youth. I will share some information about that, and hopefully convey what is in the Lord's heart pertaining to that.

I will ask for your prayers; and hopefully we can pray together, and join together on this matter. I feel that when you are asked to share, there is a reason for it. I do not get asked to share all the time; but when I do, I always ask the Lord, "Do I have permission to do that? Can I do that? And why?"

I often receive this scripture when I do have the freedom to share, and it is from Romans. I will have a topic, right? I am going to share about LifeWise; but I always need more than that. I need from the Lord, "Why should I share?" The scripture where I was encouraged from the Lord, where I feel like the Lord said I could go ahead and share, is from the first chapter of Romans. Paul was greeting the church there. I feel like the chunks of these letters that I am going to read today are living and active. They may not match up perfectly, but it is the same church, the same resurrected Lord, the same Spirit. And so, I read this from Paul to you, but also some of it is from my heart and our heart from Emporia too.

Paul said in Romans 1:1-12:

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

I am not an apostle. I have prayed for you. I cannot say I pray for you unceasingly night and day, but I have prayed for this fellowship. You have prayed for me.

When I was praying, I asked the Lord, “What is the meaning of this? What is the heart behind this?” I felt the Lord's heart, the same way Paul said, is that I long to see you. I have heard you have been praying for us; you have been supporting us. There is a longing to see you; and I do pray that something will be imparted to you; that you will be strengthened, and mutually so, because we need it.

This is a very intimate thing. Paul loved this church. They were in the gospel together. It seems powerful when he says, “the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” There is something powerful there; that is where we are connected, our Lord. I feel like your Lord encouraged me. I felt it last night and this morning, sensing Him saying, “I want to encourage this group of Christians, My people. I want to impart something to them.” So, I pray that is what we are going to do today.

Let us pray.

Lord, I thank You so much for this morning, I thank You for this great gospel of Jesus Christ. Lord, this is good news. We do say again, worthy is the Lamb. Lord, we pray that this message will be in that same spirit of worship because You are worthy. You are worthy of being listened to; You are worthy to be honored; You are worthy for us to tell others about You. More importantly God, You are worthy, even as we are telling, for us to show forth Your glory and show forth Your testimony. So, I pray You will strengthen it. At the end of all this, that You would use this time to impart something: You are a real God, with a real life; and You have real gifts and real power. It is a real gospel, Lord. We are not boxing the air or just playing games. Lord, we have real words to deliver; we have real encouragement to give; and Lord, the group here has real encouragement to give back. We expect that transaction, and You desire it today. I ask that Your will would be done in Your name, Lord Jesus.

I do want to give a warning. I probably will use the word “gospel” a whole lot. It is a habit I am picking up from reading the Bible and reading Paul. I may say it so many times that you might think, “What is he talking about?” It is one of those church words.

I thought about it. The gospel is one of those words you hear, and your brain is so familiar with it you think, “Oh yeah, I know what that is.” So, if I have a message and I say I am going to talk about the gospel, you kind of take that word, throw it back in the file cabinet, and say, “Let us see what else he has to say,” right? There is nothing else to say. This is the heart of it. And I believe the encouragement that God wants to give you or impart to you is an encouragement in the gospel. Let the Holy Spirit interpret what that will mean.

We are going to talk about the gospel; that is the purpose behind LifeWise, this gospel, which we know means, “good news.” Everybody knows that. If you did not know that before, now you know: the gospel means, “good news.” I wanted to read this scripture, and then I will go into speaking about LifeWise Academy: what it is, where we have been, and those types of things.

The Lord Is Anointed to Bring Gospel to the Poor

Isaiah 61 is a scripture my wife has talked about frequently over the last year or two. We have been thinking about it, praying about it, and it has come up repeatedly. Isaiah 61:1-3 says:

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of our God’s vengeance; to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion; to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, festive oil instead of mourning, and splendid clothes instead of despair. And they will be called righteous trees, planted by the LORD to glorify him.”

Now think about the Lord Himself. This is talking about the same Lord that we sang about: the One that is resurrected; the One that is living in you and me; the One that is in His church, and has invested Himself in His church. These are the verses He read when He gave His own testimony about Himself. He is anointed; we all know He is anointed, but He is anointed to do these things. I have learned that wherever the Lord really is, these things happen. They must happen because that is what He has been anointed to do.

Within here, we see the first thing He says is to bring good news to the poor. We are the poor. These songs that we were singing encourage me. I just turned 46 this week, and to watch people who are older than me still raise their hands when songs say something like, “You saved me from my sin, and you saved me from my shame.” You are still undone by the reality that this good news is still good after all you have been through. I have thought about that.

I like to share things the Lord has put in my heart. And I was thinking about the testimonies that are in this room, the things that people have been through. Then I looked down at the hymn book and thought, “All these brothers and sisters wrote these songs, all the testimonies that are represented in these songs.” All the testimonies that are represented in this room: all the sicknesses that you have had to go through; all the deaths, the disappointments, discouragements; church fights, miscommunication, all the misunderstandings. Those things represent what you have been through, and to still show up and still testify to the goodness of God is a wonderful thing.

Then it made me feel so small, I thought, “Man, I am just a speck in the whole spectrum of eternity.” In the speck of this time, I get to stand up and share something. I told the Lord, “I probably should not be here.” I felt like the Lord said, “You go encourage My people. You encourage My people.” That is what I hear from the Lord. He is very adamant about that, that we would be encouraged and that the good news would keep being the good news.

The Reality of the Gospel

And that is our Lord's heart. That is why He came and saved us. That is why He is the God that leaves the 99 to get the one; we are all the one. He left everything to come get us and us "ones" make up the whole. This is the heart behind God, His heart, what He is anointed to do. You guys know this, it is a wonderful thing. But to have the good news can cause a lot of agony and suffering while you are on earth; people are still dying, people are still going astray. Whole sections of society are still under the grips of Satan while we have this glorious freedom in Christ Jesus. It can cause a lot of prayer, intercession, fasting, and trying to figure God out, trying to pray, trying to witness.

Seeking and Being Set Apart

For years, I feel, in Emporia, a lot of people have heard these things, so I am not going to spend too much time on them. But I will make points about the history of LifeWise. It did not start with LifeWise itself; it started with this reality of who Jesus is. It started with this reality of, "He is anointed to do these things. Then how come I am not seeing Him do these things?" Then you cry out to the Lord, that is how you stand in the gap. You see something of the Lord, the reality; then you see the condition of either yourself, a church, men, or the lost. And you stand in that gap, and you ask the Lord, "Are you going to bridge this gap? Why am I seeing these things?"

Out of that heart, you begin to pray, you begin to seek, you begin to do a whole lot of work. I grew up in Emporia; but ministry-wise, probably for the last 25 years I have been caring about the things of the Lord. Some years have been spent trying to get captured by this gospel. I think about how Paul talks about the gospel, and he says he was set apart for this gospel. I remember, probably 10 or 12 years ago, being captured by that phrase because I knew what Paul had done and what he was doing, and he was suffering. But he says of himself, "I am set apart for the gospel."

So, everything you see come out of me is because of what I have been set apart for, which is this gospel. I remember asking myself, "Can I say that? Can I look God in the face and say I am set apart for the gospel?" I did not know. When you do not know things and questions come to you like that, they turn into prayers. I told the Lord, "I want to be set apart for the gospel." At the end of my life, I want to be set apart for the good news.

The Lord's Work in Us

And that is what the Lord is doing, setting us apart for the gospel. I was walking that way and trying to do things, probably in my flesh a lot of the time; or maybe even in my own emotions, because you really get to care for people. Then you go through the process of God having to burn out your own emotions so He can have a pure burden. Sometimes through this process, I thought I was set apart for the gospel; but really, I cared in my own flesh. That had to die so it could be God who cares all the time, no matter what I feel like or what it looks like.

Through this process and through what seems like failure, I know the Lord will get whatever blessings He wants to get out of whatever we do. That is up to Him. That will be up to Him in eternity. The fruit is up to the Lord.

I will fast forward 20 some years. I do not want to get into telling stories; but I got to the place where I told the Lord, through prayer, "It looks like nothing is working: I have preached; I go on the street and preach, and lead church services; I go here, I go there." I was working at a high school and I shared the gospel there. It just seems like it was darker and darker and darker.

Finding Strength in Weakness

Last night, I was touched by the Lord because I was thinking about scripture; and the Lord reminded me of the church in Philadelphia. They were weak, but they had honored the Word of God. They were not ashamed; they kept the name of Jesus. You can get to a point where you love God, you love your brothers and sisters, but you just cannot do anything. It seems that is when God likes to open doors. That is what He told His church in Philadelphia. He said, "I see that you are doing this, but I have opened the door for you." He gave them the key of David, "I have opened a door that no man can shut."

Through prayer and seeking the Lord, we came to a point where we had the prayer, we had the heart, we had the commission from God. I feel like it got boiled down to, "Well, I know this Word is true, and I know the name of Jesus is what we stand for, but we do not have the strength to do anything." I did not have the strength to organize a nonprofit organization; I did not have the wisdom either. I did not have the strength to put all those pieces in place. Things get dark, and at the right time, God opens a door that nobody could think about. He sends this ministry, that is almost a prepackaged ministry, listing all the steps.

Lifewise Academy is a nonprofit organization that is across the nation. But the whole heart of Lifewise Academy is that during school hours, children, if their parents sign them up for it, can be picked up for Bible study or be picked up to hear the gospel. And somebody brought it to my attention. And like I said, before this came about, all that work with children, I realized boiled down to: "these children only need one thing, they need the Living Word of God."

The Power of Prayer

They need a lot of things, but the only thing they really need is the Living Word of God. Four or five years ago I latched onto that prayer as the Lord said, "this is all I want you to pray right now." So, for a couple of years, the Lord said, "when you pray for the youth of Emporia, and when you pray for Emporia, just pray this." Then I realized, hey, this is a prayer the Apostle Paul prays; that a door would be opened, that the Word would go forth swiftly. So, then I felt in good company. For years I have been praying, "Would you just get them the Word; could you please get them the Word. Lord, get the Word to them because this is their salvation. This is the only hope, there is no hope outside of this Word."

And so, I was praying; and it is not the whole answer, but part of the answer is this Lifewise Academy. It came about at the right time and the right people were in the right place for it to happen.

The Lord's Confirmation with LifeWise Academy

LifeWise Academy is a nonprofit organization, that in the 1950s identified a provision in the Constitution that allowed release time in schools for what is called "religious instruction," because you could not narrow it down to Christianity. So, it is legal to release students for a time of religious instruction. There are three criteria for it: their parents must agree to it in writing; it cannot be on school property; and it cannot cost the school districts any money.

There are hundreds of them across the United States, and Emporia is the only one in Virginia right now. I think there are other ones getting ready to start. The founder's mom is from Emporia, and she was adamant about Emporia having one and really encouraged it. My own personal testimony with it was what I just told you: I prayed, and in the end, I felt like the Lord said, "This is the answer to that prayer."

At one point I thought, "This is a nonprofit organization. What does this have to do with the church? This is not spiritual." I told my wife, "I do not think I want anything to do with this." She said, "I think you ought to ask the Lord." You know how that usually goes, the Lord brought it about.

While I was sitting in the first information meeting about it, the Lord softened my heart and said, "This is an answer to what you have been praying." That was almost three years ago now, when we just heard about it. This scripture about the Philadelphia church in Revelation really stuck out to me last night because of that phrase, "The Lord opened the door." I was thinking about LifeWise, and I thought, "This probably should not be happening in Emporia right now, and surely I probably should not be the leader of it."

Reflection on Prayer and God's Provision

Then I thought of all the provisions; all the people saying they are praying, all the things that just happened and keep happening. Part of me feels like I am watching God say, "I love people so much." He is still anointed to bring good news to the poor. He is chomping at the bit to get people in His presence.

I have seen the Lord provide money, a bus, people to teach. I am not part of the day-to-day activity, teaching the children the Bible and preaching the gospel to them. I get to be what they call a director; to stand in the gap, and do some paperwork and some prayer. To watch the Lord open a door, a door where you think, "I never would have thought about that." That is how you know it is the Lord.

A couple years ago I was telling the Lord: "I do not like what is going on. This whole town needs the gospel;" and now almost 280 elementary school children get to hear the gospel every week. I am very busy, so I do not get to think about it; I am thinking about it even now while I am talking to you. Last night I was thinking about it a lot, and thought,

“Is that really happening?” I looked at the number of children and I know the people that are teaching them. These people really are in a classroom telling these children about the Bible and telling them about Jesus, and being loving. These children know these people love them.

The Lord is good. To watch Him love on people, and to watch Him provide, and to watch Him be Himself is glorious. You all probably know that better than I do. When you get to that point, you think whatever you had to go through, it does not exist anymore. At that point, maybe naively, you think, “Well, bring on to whatever is next.” That is the way we should be going, from glory to glory, right?

Prayers and Supports Are Much Appreciated

Coming to you, I thought about Romans 1. We have the same Lord, and Paul says, “I want to impart something to you.” I have also been thinking about Philippians. Philippians is real to us, and I can feel it. When you say, “Hey, we are praying for you down there.” I say, “I know.” And I know, not because maybe Christie came down and told me; I know because at one or two in the morning when there is spiritual warfare going on and I feel like all hell has broken loose, I feel strengthened.

So, when some of you brothers and sisters have said, “Hey, we are praying for you.” If I ever looked at you and said, “Oh, I know;” I am not joking, I mean it. I would not be here if you were not praying.

Philippians 1:1-11. I am going to read, starting at the beginning. It says, “Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus: To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons. (This is to you guys here also in Richmond, I should say to the saints in Richmond.) Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God for every remembrance of you, always praying with joy for all of you in my every prayer, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am sure of this, that He who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, and you are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and establishment of the gospel. For God is my witness, how deeply I miss all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And I pray this: that your love will keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment, so that you can approve the things that are superior and can be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.”

I thought this was very serious because you guys were praying for us in Emporia; before there was work going on, there has been prayer. Paul had this Philippian church and he was saying, “You guys were praying from day one. The gospel was not even established when you guys were praying for us.” What does that even mean? I underlined that and asked the Lord last night, “Is the gospel established in Emporia?” Whatever Paul meant by that, it is what God wants.

God's Work in Us and in Emporia

The prayer, joining together in Christ Jesus with the establishment of the gospel in Emporia. Paul is saying to them, "Hey, you guys have been with me." As you go on, you realize sometimes it can get lonely caring about the things of God. Paul said sometimes, "everybody deserted me." It meant a lot for Paul and Timothy to say to a people, "You were with me from day one."

I am getting away from LifeWise, but it is all part of the gospel. I am no apostle; I am just a guy from Emporia. Paul is telling the Philippians, "Hey, you are with me in the establishment of this." And he tells them, "I am sure God will start the work, and He will finish the work that He started with you." But when I was reading this, I felt it was to this church; that it is to the ones here that have stood and fought, have been through things together. God, what He started and why He wanted this fellowship here, He will finish it. It is just what He does.

Paul said, "It is right for me to think this way." It is a right way of thinking that when we capture the heart of God, who He is; and we are set apart for the gospel, we are seeing the gospel established here. You have been partners in establishing the gospel in Emporia. LifeWise is a piece of it. LifeWise is not the church; it is an outreach, it is a ministry; it is a part of it, and it has been a blessing. If you want to know anything about the organization, how it is run, who is the guy that started it, talk to me.

Thank You for Your Partnership

We want to thank you for your partnership. I have gotten emails that said, "Hey, we are praying." There are checks, provision that has shown up at the right time from this fellowship. People ask, "Can we pray about this?" such encouragement comes from that. God can speak any way He wants. When other saints are partnering with you; that is God speaking. It is like God saying, "Stand there, keep going, keep praying, I am with you."

You are not invisible, but you are invisible in Emporia. You are part of the cloud of witnesses for us. I just wanted to say thank you for partnering with us. There are other things the Lord wants to establish as we go. I will get into that and give some prayer requests at the end.

Trusting God's Provision

The way LifeWise came about and the way God seemed to come around it, almost since it started, people would donate money. We needed to buy something, and it is \$10,000, and that is a lot of money to me and I am thinking, "we probably should not buy that." But then we need to do this, we must get this by this date. Almost every time we needed something like that, within two or three days, we received the same amount or more.

When I am by myself, I can think, "That is a lot of money. I need to send \$5,000 here; that will cost \$10,000." Sometimes it is small. And then it happens: funds come in; and it

is the timing of it, I know it is the Lord. I have these moments with the Lord when it seems He is playing with me, saying, "Go ahead and get more and see what happens next."

The Lord has been that way with LifeWise. We say, "All glory to God." It is God's glory, He has helped raise it up. He has blessed us with the children. It is a girl from back home named Leslie who was a teacher that helped almost all the students get enrolled. This one teacher that we know and fellowship with sometimes, has a heart for evangelism and reaching out to children.

Katherine and Geoffrey were coming down. This started and then Kent and my family got involved; and Gail, for some reason, thought she wanted to be a bus driver. That may be the biggest miracle. But think about it. If the children cannot get there, they do not hear the gospel. There were things like that, people stepping up without anybody asking. The brother that bought the bus, he came to me himself and said, "You are going to need a bus. I will buy it." Those are some of my testimonies from my side.

Other testimonies from my side include seeing how the school board came together. We have a superintendent that for some reason really likes LifeWise. In other school districts, the superintendents seem a little afraid and kind of in a political position, asking, "should we let this program be here or not?"

By God's grace, Dr. Edwards, our superintendent, is still going to bat for us and standing up for us. We see that open door. From a director's view, I get to see God's hand that way.

Stories of Impacts

The Lord Raises Up a Standard

Katherine: We do have some really cool stories, but the whole time I have been listening this morning, I have been thinking about one thing. When we were in Richmond, I remember a prayer that was prayed repeatedly at the prayer meeting. People would come in, and they would give reports about the school system and how things were getting worse and worse, and how more and more evil was being allowed in. I specifically remember, even through Covid, this prayer being prayed over and over: that the Lord would do something and that He would raise a standard.

The word came to me in a prayer meeting one time, "When the evil comes in like a flood, when the enemy comes in like a flood, the Lord will raise up a standard." I think of that, and I think of those prayers that we prayed almost all the time when I see what is happening in Emporia with LifeWise; because I specifically remember asking the Lord to do something miraculous to raise up a standard against all the evil that is flooding into the schools. And I remember those prayers all the time when we see what is happening.

Bringing Christ to the Families through the Children

Christie: Stephen shared that that same verse at the Lifewise dinner just recently. There was a child last year that came to Lifewise and I think he had a Bible already. But

he wanted to read his Bible, and he would go to the child watch at the YMCA, where Gianna just happened to be the caregiver. And he would bring his Bible and ask to read the Bible with Gianna every time he came in.

And then out of that, he asked someone to take him to church. This child just approaches somebody that he knows that goes to church and starts attending church. And then his entire family is now going to church because of this child. So, the standard is not only people taking a stand for these students; but it is also what God is doing through them already. The Lord is not only working in them, but the Lord is working through them to change and to help their families to draw near to Him.

Geoffrey is on a street with a lot of foot traffic, people walking by all the time. People see him, and they ask, "Oh, are you one of the LifeWise teachers?" I remember a story Geoffrey told that once when he answered, "yes, I am;" the child who asked the question responded, "Oh, yeah, I heard this story that you guys taught this week," but the child is not in LifeWise. That child heard about it from another LifeWise student at school who shared.

So, a fourth and fifth-grade child is telling other students what they heard at LifeWise. The children are already being used. The Lord is raising that standard beyond what we have the means and the capability to do.

Reflections on LifeWise in Children Ministry in Emporia

Joy: When Geoffrey and Katherine first moved to Emporia, they were kind of halfway there, halfway here, and staying in a house that Betty Ann had sold to Stephen and me. It has a lot of land. We were doing a youth Bible study at our house; and some of the younger children would go to their house during that youth Bible study. Soon the same girl, Leslie, that Stephen and I talked about, wanted to bring her whole public-school class to where the younger children were, where Geoffrey and Katherine were.

So, she started to pick up loads of children and bring them over. At one point, there were so many children that we had to move our youth meeting over there too, so we would have some people to watch over all these children. Stephen was concerned that we could get in trouble, because some of these children come from pretty bad backgrounds. We needed more supervision. This is before LifeWise.

And then the Lord raised up LifeWise right after that. It was a miracle, the way everything came together. With LifeWise, we have far more capability to reach and bring in children. When we first started, we did not have the big bus. We had Gail's big van. We had another big van, and then my minivan. We would go pick up the children at elementary school. In my minivan, I remember I would ask these children, "So tell me what you all know about Noah's Ark." They did not even know stories that most everyone would think that they would know, they knew nothing.

It is almost like being in a third-world country. In our country, we now have a generation of children that are not taken to church. There are no Sunday schools anymore.

You go to a lot of churches, and there are no Sunday schools. These children knew none of the stories that we all take for granted, that we grew up learning. It was eye-opening to see the lack of knowing anything about Jesus.

I think that is what stood out to me so much. Even this year, some of the classes were teaching on the Ten Commandments; and to hear these children say things when they realize some of the things they do on a daily basis is actually sin. They are gripped with conviction, and they see their parents living in sin, they know.

It is really a miracle that the Lord has raised us up, and a lot of you know we have been in Emporia a long time. This was our 20th anniversary, so I have personally been there 20 years, and Stephen longer. We appreciate all your prayers and all your caring for us because we do kind of feel like we are on a mission field. It is a very different culture. You can ask Katherine. She came into a very different culture.

But it is amazing to see the Lord raising up something miraculous. After all these years, through LifeWise, the gospel is going out; and this whole next generation in Emporia can literally be transformed as they get older. That is our prayer. We just appreciate all of you praying.

Children's Understanding of the Ten Commandments

Katherine: There really are so many stories, and I may repeat some of them. But like we said, we went through the Ten Commandments the last couple of months of the school year. And as we are going through the Ten Commandments in the first-grade class, we get to "Do not murder." You may think that is one where you say, "Oh, you know, Jesus explains this also means you do not hate."

Well, we already knew there was one girl in the room whose dad had murdered her mom. Then there is a girl across the room who said, "Yeah, my dad is in jail for murder." Then there was someone else who said, "Yeah, my uncle is in jail for murder." This is in a class of 12 first graders, and now the gospel means something.

I think every single week as we are talking about things, children will come up to me, "Oh, my mom does this. Oh, my dad does this." But it is a privilege. This year we were all in Exodus, talking about the Israelites coming out of Egypt and the Lord raising up a standard. Alongside the Ten Commandments, there is also, "Be holy as I am holy." Even the children of Israel, as they go out, the Lord is calling them to live in a way that none of the other nations around them are living. The Lord is calling them and raising up a standard for them.

To be able to encourage the children with this, and they are receiving it. Yes, this is all around you, but the Lord is calling you and raising up a standard for you to represent Him. This is the message they have been hearing for the last few months. We have had many classes when children are in tears, when many in the class are in tears. I know Geoffrey has had experiences like when the little boy we were talking about said, "Wait, so is the

gospel like this?" He explained the whole thing back to Geoffrey, and Geoffrey said, "Yeah, that is it." The little boy's eyes just lit up.

I think ever since then, he has had those experiences where he met up with Gianna at the YMCA. There are seeds being planted. Now we are also aware they are going back to homes where there is nothing. Some of these children live on my street, and I know that if they have a parent around, their parents are almost not there.

I know that is a big prayer we have had, when they go home, when they leave, the 20 minutes a week that they have of hearing the word, that those seeds would stay with them. On my street, I see these children on a regular basis. I took a bunch of them for a walk maybe a month ago down to the river, and on the way back, they were saying, "Oh, do not do that. That is breaking a commandment." Or, "Ms. Katherine, she is breaking one of the commandments."

It shows they are thinking about it, and then they are turning to their friend and telling them, "You broke a commandment." Something is sticking.

Open Doors for the Word of God

Kent: I am just a volunteer for one class, so I am hardly worthy to be called a LifeWise helper. But when Stephen was sharing about his prayer for the Word going forward, I saw the Lord's parable of the Sower. The seed is the Word of God, and I can testify of one little seed that the Lord gave me the opportunity to plant.

They have said we were going through the Ten Commandments this year. Bobby, one of the teachers, had this little hand trick he was using to teach the children the Ten Commandments. One I remember was adultery, seven. He had two fingers going behind the hand, they are hiding from the rest because they are doing something they should not do. That was how he remembered adultery.

All the children are learning the commandments, but then Bobby was concluding it with the gospel message. I do not know if anyone is familiar with Ray Comfort and his gospel preaching; he always shares the Ten Commandments as his way into the gospel, and Bobby was doing that. I saw this one child that I could tell was confused. He asked, "So hold on, are we supposed to follow these commandments or not? Are these Ten Commandments for getting into heaven or not?" So, on the bus I had about five minutes with him. I sat next to him and explained that last little bit that Bobby was talking about, when Bobby asked, "So do you keep all these commandments?" He answered, "Well, no, not perfectly."

And then I asked, "so if God were to judge you by them, would you be guilty or innocent?" He said, "Well, we would all be guilty." I agreed, "That is the whole point of what Bobby said at the end, that Jesus actually took the penalty that was due unto us." Just to see it click in his mind, that maybe for the first time in his whole life, at least he understood the truth of the gospel.

I do not know if he was born again at that moment, but it was one of those many little seeds that the Lord is casting. It seems like for years there was an impediment to the Word of God even coming forth. Like Stephen was saying, LifeWise is just a piece, but it seems like the Lord is opening the door for the seeds to go out, and we are also praying not just for the seed to go out now, but also for the ground to be right.

Like Katherine was saying, they are going to go home and a lot of times there is nothing. Well, a lot of times the birds of the air are probably snatching the Word even at home; because we are finding that there is a lot of weird stuff that is taught in different places throughout Emporia. So, we are praying for the soil; we are praying for the evil one to be held back from snatching the Word. It is a real encouragement that the Lord does seem to be opening the door, that the seed is being able to be scattered. Praise the Lord.

Prayers

Stephen: In closing, I will read a few scriptures related to prayer. You are getting a report, but this is the work we are doing. You help us with prayer and support us with the kind of support I believe Apostle Paul had. I will read through these verses quickly.

In Ephesians 6:19, Paul says, “Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.”

In Colossians 4:2-4, he says, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.”

In I Thessalonians 1:2-5a, he says, “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”

In II Thessalonians 3:1-5, it says, “Finally, brothers, pray for us that the Lord’s message may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful; He will strengthen and guard you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do what we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to God’s love and Christ’s endurance.”

Prayers for the Ministry in Emporia

Through prayer the Lord has opened the door. Continue to pray for us that once we are in that door, we will say what we ought to. If you notice, this is my prayer request. Because like Kent said, before it seemed like the Word was not even going out. The Word is out now. It is going out, not fully, it is just getting started.

Speaking in Boldness, Power to Convict, Words be Honored

So, it is going out, but I am starting to notice these other things that are tied to it. Like Paul can go out and speak, but now he is asking, “Pray that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness.” So, as it is going out, pray that we would have boldness. Pray that we would know what we ought to say and how to say it.

If the Apostle Paul had to keep asking these churches, “Hey, pray for me that I would know what to say when I open my mouth, that I can do this with boldness;” that is what we need: boldness. So, pray for us for boldness that we would not just make known, but with boldness.

Also, he said in Thessalonians, “The gospel came to them not in word only, but it came to them in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction.” Pray we are not giving out the Word, the gospel, in word only. Pray that it would be the true gospel and it will be accompanied with these things.

Because these children, God's church, we need power, His Holy Spirit, and we need full conviction. Some versions say, “with full assurance.” Because I know a lot of people, a lot of children, go to church in Emporia; but they do not walk around like they have full assurance. That is what we are praying for. I would beg for that prayer, that it would go forth with power by the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; that the Holy Spirit would be able to honor that Word.

Paul said in II Thessalonians 3:1a, “Finally, brothers, pray for us that the Lord's message may spread rapidly and be honored.” So, pray, like Kent said, the Word is going forth. This is something I read during a prayer meeting, when the only thing I was praying was that it would go forth rapidly.

I feel like the Lord said, “Now it is going forth, you need to pray that it starts to be honored. When you talk about it going in these homes, pray that it would be honored just as it was with you.”

Transformation, Protection, and Growth

In I Thessalonians, Paul said, “When the word came to you, you just did not receive this Word as, 'That is great; we agree with it.'” He said, “You were changed. You received this word with full conviction, power, and the Holy Spirit, and you were changed. Everybody knew about it.”

That is what he means when he says, “Be honored.” Because he says in II Thessalonians, “Pray that it will go swiftly and be honored just as it was among you.” We do not want to fill Emporia with more Bible knowledge, right? We want to see more children filled with Christ and assured.

There is a song Gianna sings, that they use as a theme: “He knows My Name.” Because we all know when we are assured with full assurance, which only the Holy Spirit can give us, that child is going to be good usually for eternity. That is what we are praying for.

So, pray for that boldness for those that speak, and pray that the Word that is going out swiftly will begin to be honored in homes. And that even in churches it would be honored, so God can do His work behind His Word and bring about that fruit that He wants.

That prayer also in II Thessalonians about being held back from the evil one. Like Kent said, pray that these seeds would go in good ground and the enemy would not keep snatching them. Those are the prayers that we need now that are specific, and I believe strategic to God getting what He desires so He can keep building His church. He can keep making beautiful His bride for His return.

We do not preach the gospel just so people can feel good about themselves; but so they can know Christ and Christ can get what He died for; that He can get that beautiful, glorious church. Whatever part of that church He desired and died to get out of Emporia, Virginia during our generation, I pray that we will be faithful to do our part and that we will be strengthened.

Prayer for You All

To wrap it up and finish, I want to pray for you guys that the gospel will become fresh to you; it will become powerful again to you; it will become sweet to you. Because of your partnering with us and your giving, I pray the Lord would give you the same blessing that He has given us; because of your work, that He would strengthen you.

Strength, Open Doors, Boldness

Those of you who are tired and those of you who are going through struggles, I pray the Lord would strengthen you with holy expectation of this glorious gospel that we have. Nobody else has it. It is only in Christ Jesus. It is only in the church.

I pray the same thing for you that I asked you to pray for us: that God would give you open doors, that God would give you boldness, that the gospel would spread swiftly, and it would be honored in the church and wherever you go. I pray what Paul said about the Philippians partnering with him in the establishment of the gospel. May God show us together more about what that is, what Paul meant when he says that.

I pray that this gospel will be so fresh to us. We are a gospel community. Sometimes we use the phrase, “There is a gospel meeting.” Was today a gospel meeting? It was to me; I was reminded of who I am and who Christ is. I understand we have evangelists. And I know we need to preach the gospel. We should have those gospel meetings.

Renewed in Belief and Hope in the Power of the Gospel

I have been thinking a whole lot about Romans 1:16, where Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is God’s power for salvation to everyone who believes.”

I feel the key the Lord wants to impart to you is a renewed stirred-up belief: to be a renewed believing people; to inject belief into you afresh, like it is the first day you have ever heard it or ever met Him.

That is what the Lord does, He makes it new every day. I was reading one day where it says, "It is the power unto salvation, the gospel." I was asking the Lord, "Well, I preached the gospel to a lot of people, and there was no power. Nobody got saved." I felt like I almost heard the Lord say to me, "Well, Stephen, if I could get the ones preaching it to believe it, maybe I could act."

The Lord showed me that belief works two ways. God wants you to believe again. No matter what it feels like, or what the world tells you, there is only one message. There is only one hope in Christ Jesus, and you have it. Act like it, be bold and tell people you know. And younger people, if you cannot say you are set apart for the gospel, ask the Lord about it. Tell Him that you want your life set apart for the gospel. If you are captured by Christ, you want to be set apart for the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of Christ.

Paul, if you think about it, was set apart for the gospel when he was getting beaten for preaching it; and he was set apart for the gospel when he was making tents. It is not about what it should look like, it is between you and the Lord. He died for you. He loves you.

Ask the Lord to let you be set apart for the gospel, and believe it. Believe what you already have. It is like the Lord said, "The reality of what you need right now is right under your nose. It is called the gospel. Believe it and speak it."

Let us pray.

I thank You for this morning, Lord. I thank You that it comes down to the fact that You are wonderful. You are God, and You died for us, Lord Jesus. It is so simple. I pray that You would renew whatever this means to You, Lord; You would renew it in our lives. I pray for this group here, the ones that have given money, and have prayed for us; they have encouraged us. Lord, I thank You for this partnership.

I pray You would stir up belief in this fellowship. They will begin to believe like they were just born again today: they would find themselves singing to You more and witnessing without even thinking about it; and enjoying all the goodness of so great a salvation that You have bought and purchased with Your own blood.

Lord, I pray You would refresh people here, people who are weary or people maybe who are just going through motions because it is all they have the strength to do. You love to come and strengthen people. So, Lord, I pray You would strengthen them. May there be fresh belief in this house, and in this portion of Your house; a mighty belief, Lord, and strengthen the ones that have been standing and fighting for so long and Lord, make them brand new in You, Lord Jesus.

I am confident, and it is the right thing to say: the work You started here, You will be bringing to completion Lord; and on that day You will get what You desired. So, Lord, I thank You for the fellowship today, and we love You. In Your name, Jesus. Amen.

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