

# WORDS FROM THE WILDERNESS

Establishing a Prayer Team To Share God's Heart to Reach the Lost

## The Painful “Presents” of Weakness

It was a beautiful Saturday back at the end of September. Stephanie and I had two young believers (including Alex, one of the new converts from my last newsletter) who were spending the day at our house bombarding us with questions about faith, theology, and how to be a follower of Jesus. We had stepped out onto our back deck to take a break and to enjoy the fall sunshine. As we all walked around, I took a normal, innocent, innocuous step off of the sidewalk, and suddenly there was a loud, unmistakable “SNAP!” Stephanie, who was about fifteen feet away, said, “What was that,” but I couldn’t answer. Because I had collapsed on the ground, writhing in pain. It turns out, as X-rays would later confirm, that this “one small step” had somehow broken my foot. And boy, did I feel it! Later that afternoon, as the PA at the med clinic wrapped up my foot, he assured me that it wasn’t age related: “Athletes get this same break all the time,” he said, although I suspect he may have just been trying to reassure my doubts, and I am under no illusion of being an athlete. Either way, he then went on to warn me: “This is a bad break, almost transecting the foot, and if you don’t stay off of it, the entire bone could break completely, and that would mean you have to have surgery.”

Not being a fan of experiencing further breaks, nor wanting to go under a surgeon’s knife, I began several weeks of careful, frustrating efforts to navigate life with one broken foot. If you have ever had to cope with a broken foot or leg, you know exactly what I am talking about – that life is challenging when you try to make it through each day on one foot. Just getting up from a chair became an ordeal. Any errant movement or misplaced weight on the broken foot brought a new flash of pain. And don’t even get me started on what it was like getting in and out of vehicles or hopping around on crutches.



I would like to tell you I handled all this with grace, dignity, and courage. That they should make an afternoon special movie about me that would inspire many others to overcome their difficulties. But the truth is more that I reacted to it all like a big ol’ baby. I will admit, I am not a very good patient when it comes to self-care. I was frustrated. I was grumpy. I don’t like being slowed down, sometimes literally to a crawl. And I don’t like feeling weak.

In a larger perspective, admitting I am weak is hard for me. It touches on a lot of fears. It brings back a lot of shame. That people will figure out that I don’t know what I’m doing (I don’t, by the way). Or that I am not needed. Or maybe, that things (and people) would be better off without me.

And maybe that was the point. For the Bible reminds us (2 Corinthians 12) that it is in our weakness that we find God’s strength – and collapse again into His ever-present grace. Maybe that was the lesson I needed to learn (again) last fall (and now): That God is not impressed by my strength, my speed, nor my success. But He is a Father who loves to bring wounded, broken sheep (and shepherds) back home, close to Him.

## How I long for that awareness to mark our ministry here in Ocean Springs

2023 was our first full year of ministry here on the coast. Stephanie and I moved here in **2022** (“Year 0” as we think about it), a year in which we found a house, transplanted our life and focus here, met a lot of new people, shook a lot of new hands, and laid the beginnings for discipleship to a core group and evangelism to the many lost people in this town. But **2023** was “Year 1” of full fledged ministry. And we marvel at all that God has done – so quickly:

- He has created a **core group of Christians**. Couples, children, and single adults who are becoming brothers and sisters, a family together, encouraging one another and learning our identity and calling as a gospel community centered around Jesus. At first, we were meeting every



other week with this group, but at the end of the year, we moved up to **meeting every Sunday night in our house**. One of the couples has volunteered to use their skills to lead singing and worship at our meetings, and we are loving seeing this group coming closer and closer together, as we learn to fall more in love with Jesus and with each other!

And a core group praise update: I recently had the privilege to baptize Rose, and Alex (both from our last newsletter) has joined a sister church in Birmingham, where he has moved, and been baptized there. We are praising God for saving both of them!!

- And together, we are praying God uses us to **reach all of Ocean Springs for Jesus Christ**. We are encouraging and discipling the core group to find their “parish of influence” here in town, while I am going daily, weekly, and nightly into my “Government Street Parish.” In short, I am praying that God will make me the “Pastor of Government Street” – and He has already given so much favor toward that. I could share story after story of bartenders, waitresses, musicians, and “down and out” people I am meeting there – People whom God is opening the door for conversations and relationships and trust toward entering into their lives to share the grace and gospel of Jesus.

Just one quick story that affirms how God is opening doors there: Before Christmas, one of the bartenders from “The Grocery,” a bar on Government Street, called me up and said, “We are closing the bar two days before Christmas, so we can have a staff only, “Friends and Family” party. And we want you to come!” That meant the world to me, as I saw it as an encouraging sign of being welcomed “into the tribe.” Lord willing, that means that, as a missionary to the locals, there will be more and more chances to speak to them of the gospel! So I went, just before Christmas, and spent the evening engaged in listening and in sharing with lost people from that bar. And through it all, I was blown away, and grateful, and amazed at the access and the opportunity God has given in such a short time!



That is the story God is writing and telling in Ocean Springs. God has done it. God is doing it. And we are believing that “He who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ!” (Philippians 1:6), a day in which there will be, worshipping Jesus as Savior, people from every race, tribe, nation, and tongue (Rev. 7).... Including from the tribe of Ocean Springs, for God is calling the lost back to Himself! The work is His. The glory is His. And our hope for the future is in Him!

## Here are four strategic goals we are praying, in His strength, not our own, God will bring about:

### With the core group:

- That God will develop and deepen a gospel-centered identity, relationship, and purpose within the core group. That we will know we are saved by the grace of Jesus, and that the gospel changes everything – so we are saved for a larger purpose beyond just ourselves.
- And from that, Stephanie and I will be able to disciple the singles, couples, and families of our church toward growing up and in toward being godly husbands, wives, men, women, and leaders in the church – Followers of Jesus who (to borrow a phrase) **live their life on mission!**

### And with the Government Street Parish:

- Please pray specifically for **Barry** (name changed), the bartender who invited me to the gathering at the Grocery. Barry shared with me recently that he is realizing that his life of late-night partying and drinking is not leading him anywhere good. He asked for my help to turn things around. And, when I asked, “How can I help you, Barry,” he answered: **“Tell me about your church.”** Wow, praise God for the opportunity for fruit from the time invested in building a relationship with Barry! Please pray that God will use the longing Barry is feeling to lead him to real life and real salvation!

- And please pray for **Saul**. Saul is the rock-star musician I wrote about in a previous newsletter.



We have continued to spend a lot of time together, almost weekly, and we have had dozens of great, transparent, conversations about life, struggles, hopes, and faith. Recently, Saul, who calls himself a “reluctant atheist,” leaned in and asked me, **“Hey, Mark, a lot of my (musician) friends down here could really benefit from the kinds of conversations we are having.... Have you ever thought about starting a meeting, so that more people can be part of the discussions like you and I have?”** Of course, my heart leaped for joy at his question, but I tried to keep a straight face as I answered, “Saul, that’s a great idea!” The next time we got together, Saul came with two lists: One of friends and other “creative misfits,” (his words) like him he wanted to invite. And two, of the questions we should go over and discuss together. Then, he told me that he’d been thinking about it, and he had come up with a name for the new meeting: **“The Table.”**

So, Saul and I are now working together on this idea of launching a meeting for discussing all sorts of issues of life and faith with him and his friends. I am envisioning “The Table” as a Francis Schaeffer type, “L’Abri” type of gathering. I hope to write more on that in the future. Would you

pray that God will bring this about in the right way to be able to listen well to my new lost friends?  
And that, in His beautiful timing, God will give them ears to hear and hearts to believe the gospel !!

## God is doing it – Come be a part of it!

We are praying for a healthy, vibrant church in Ocean Springs. A church made up of believers who are loving Jesus well, and of others who are lost now, but who are added to the list of believers, of people who have been saved by the gospel of Jesus' grace.

And, we are asking God to use what He is starting in Ocean Springs to become a movement – to bless the churches and individuals and families who are part of our team. That we would be a church planting church that plants other church plants up and down the gulf coast. For the harvest plentiful – And our God is Lord of the Harvest!!

Would you **pray with us**? Would you **come and see** what God is doing in His strength and for His glory? And would you **give**, that God would use what is happening here to do things that are beyond our strength and wisdom, things beyond what we can ask for or imagine, and things for which only He can receive the glory! Thank you, dear friends. And God bless you in His grace and love!

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### A closing encouragement:

“The church should be a community where messed-up people are welcome, outcasts are loved, underdogs find a champion, the hopeless find hope, and the friendless find a friend.”  
(Author Unknown)

