

New York Times Bestseller

The Circle Maker

Praying Circles Around Your
Biggest Dreams and Greatest Fears

Mark Batterson

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The Circle Maker

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The Legend of the Circle Maker

Young children danced in the downpour like it was the first rainfall they'd ever seen. And it was. Parents threw back their heads, opened their mouths, and caught raindrops like they were libations. And they were. When it hasn't rained in more than a year, raindrops are like diamonds falling from the sky.

It would be forever remembered as *the day*. The day thunderclaps applauded the Almighty. The day puddle jumping became an act of praise. The day the legend of the circle maker was born.

It was the first century BC, and a devastating drought threatened to destroy a generation — the generation before Jesus. The last of the Jewish prophets had died off nearly four centuries before. Miracles were such a distant memory that they seemed like a false memory. And God was nowhere to be heard. But there was one man, an eccentric sage who lived outside the walls of Jerusalem, who dared to pray anyway. His name was Honi. And even if the people could no longer hear God, he believed that God could still hear them.

When rain is plentiful, it's an afterthought. During a drought, it's the only thought. And Honi was their only hope. Famous for his ability to pray for rain, it was on this day, *the day*, that Honi would earn his moniker.

With a six-foot staff in his hand, Honi began to turn like a math compass. His circular movement was rhythmical and methodical. Ninety degrees. One hundred eighty degrees. Two hundred seventy degrees. Three hundred sixty degrees. He never looked up as the

crowd looked on. After what seemed like hours but had only been seconds, Honi stood inside the circle he had drawn. Then he dropped to his knees and raised his hands to heaven. With the authority of the prophet Elijah, who called down fire from heaven, Honi called down rain:

“Lord of the universe, I swear before Your great name that I will not move from this circle until You have shown mercy upon Your children.”

The words sent a shudder down the spines of all who were within earshot that day. It wasn't just the volume of his voice; it was the authority of his tone. Not a hint of doubt. This prayer didn't originate in the vocal chords. Like water from an artesian well, the words flowed from the depth of his soul. His prayer was resolute yet humble, confident yet meek, expectant yet unassuming.

Then it happened.

As his prayer ascended to the heavens, raindrops descended to the earth. An audible gasp swept across the thousands of congregants who had encircled Honi. Every head turned heavenward as the first raindrops parachuted from the sky, but Honi's head remained bowed. The people rejoiced over each drop, but Honi wasn't satisfied with a sprinkle. Still kneeling within the circle, Honi lifted his voice over the sounds of celebration:

“Not for such rain have I prayed, but for rain that will fill cisterns, pits, and caverns.”

The sprinkle turned into such a torrential downpour that eyewitnesses said no raindrop was smaller than an egg in size. It rained so heavily and so steadily that the people fled to the Temple Mount to escape the flash floods. Honi stayed and prayed inside his protracted circle. Once more he refined his bold request:

“Not for such rain have I prayed, but for rain of Your favor, blessing, and graciousness.”

Then, like a well-proportioned sun shower on a hot and humid August afternoon, it began to rain calmly, peacefully. Each raindrop

was a tangible token of God's grace. And they didn't just soak the skin; they soaked the spirit with faith. It had been difficult to believe the day before *the day*. The day after *the day*, it was impossible *not* to believe.

Eventually, the dirt turned into mud and back into dirt again. After quenching their thirst, the crowd dispersed. And the rainmaker returned to his humble hovel on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Life returned to normal, but the legend of the circle maker had been born.

Honi was celebrated as a hometown hero by the people whose lives he had saved. But some within the Sanhedrin called the circle maker into question. A faction believed that drawing a circle and demanding rain dishonored God. Maybe it was those same members of the Sanhedrin who would criticize Jesus for healing a man's shriveled hand on the Sabbath a generation later. They threatened Honi with excommunication, but because the miracle could not be repudiated, Honi was ultimately honored for his act of prayerful bravado.

The prayer that saved a generation was deemed one of the most significant prayers in the history of Israel. The circle he drew in the sand became a sacred symbol. And the legend of Honi the circle maker stands forever as a testament to the power of a single prayer to change the course of history.

Circle Makers

The earth has circled the sun more than two thousand times since *the day* Honi drew his circle in the sand, but God is still looking for circle makers. And the timeless truth secreted within this ancient legend is as true now as it was then: *Bold prayers honor God, and God honors bold prayers.* God isn't offended by your biggest dreams or boldest prayers. He is offended by anything less. If your prayers aren't impossible to you, they are insulting to God. Why? Because they don't require divine intervention. But ask God to part the Red Sea or make the sun stand still or float an iron axhead, and God is moved to omnipotent action.

There is nothing God loves more than keeping promises, answering prayers, performing miracles, and fulfilling dreams. That is *who* He is. That is *what* He does. And the bigger the circle we draw, the better, because God gets more glory. The greatest moments in life are the miraculous moments when human impotence and divine omnipotence intersect — and they intersect when we draw a circle around the impossible situations in our lives and invite God to intervene.

I promise you this: God is ready and waiting. So while I have no idea what circumstances you find yourself in, I'm confident that you are only one prayer away from a dream fulfilled, a promise kept, or a miracle performed.

It is absolutely imperative at the outset that you come to terms with this simple yet life-changing truth: *God is for you.* If you don't believe that, then you'll pray small timid prayers; if you do believe it, then you'll pray big audacious prayers. And one way or another, your small timid prayers or big audacious prayers will change the trajectory of

your life and turn you into two totally different people. Prayers are prophecies. They are the best predictors of your spiritual future. *Who you become* is determined by *how you pray*. Ultimately, the transcript of your prayers becomes the script of your life.

In the pages that follow, you'll encounter modern-day circle makers who will inspire you to dream big, pray hard, and think long. The golf pro who prayed around the golf course he now runs will inspire you to dream bigger dreams. The government employee who beat out twelve hundred other applicants and landed the dream job he applied for twelve years in a row will challenge you to hold on to the promise God has put in your heart. The parents who prayed for their son and their son's future spouse for twenty-two years and two weeks will inspire you to pray beyond yourself. And the time-defying answer to an evangelist's prayer for a Capitol Hill movie theater in 1960 will inspire you to think long and pray hard.

The Circle Maker will show you how to claim God-given promises, pursue God-sized dreams, and seize God-ordained opportunities. You'll learn how to draw prayer circles around your family, your job, your problems, and your goals. But before I show you *how* to draw prayer circles, it's important to understand *why* it is so important. Drawing prayer circles isn't some magic trick to get what you want from God. God is not a genie in a bottle, and your wish is not His command. His command better be your wish. If it's not, you won't be drawing prayer circles; you'll end up walking in circles.

Drawing prayer circles starts with discerning what God wants, what God wills. And until His sovereign will becomes your sanctified wish, your prayer life will be unplugged from its power supply. Sure, you can apply some of the principles you learn in *The Circle Maker*, and they may help you get what you want, but getting what you want isn't the goal; the goal is glorifying God by drawing circles around the promises, miracles, and dreams He wants for you.

My First Circle

Over the years, I've drawn prayer circles around promises in Scripture and promises the Holy Spirit has conceived in my spirit. I've drawn

prayer circles around impossible situations and impossible people. I've drawn prayer circles around everything from life goals to pieces of property. But let me begin at the beginning and retrace the first prayer circle I ever drew.

When I was a twenty-two-year-old seminary student, I tried to plant a church on the north shore of Chicago, but that plant never took root. Six months later, with a failed church plant on my résumé, Lora and I moved from Chicago to Washington, DC. The opportunity to attempt another church plant presented itself, and my knee-jerk reaction was to say no, but God gave me the courage to face my fears, swallow my pride, and try again.

There was nothing easy about our first year of church planting. Our total church income was \$2,000 a month, and \$1,600 of that went to rent the DC public school cafeteria where we held Sunday services. On a good Sunday, twenty-five people would show up. That's when I learned to close my eyes in worship because it was too depressing to open them. While I had a seminary education, I really had no idea how to lead. That's challenging when you *are* the leader. I felt under-qualified and overwhelmed, but that is when God has you right where He wants you. That is how you learn to live in raw dependence—and raw dependence is the raw material out of which God performs His greatest miracles.

One day, as I was dreaming about the church God wanted to establish on Capitol Hill, I felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to do a prayer walk. I would often pace and pray in the spare bedroom in our house that doubled as the church office, but this prompting was different. I was reading through the book of Joshua at the time, and one of the promises jumped off the page and into my spirit.

"I'm giving you every square inch of the land you set your foot on—just as I promised Moses."

As I read that promise given to Joshua, I felt that God wanted me to stake claim to the land He had called us to and pray a perimeter all the way around Capitol Hill. I had a Honi-like confidence that just as this promise had been transferred from Moses to Joshua, God would transfer the promise to me if I had enough faith to circle it. So one

hot and humid August morning, I drew what would be my first prayer circle. It still ranks as the longest prayer walk I've ever done and the biggest prayer circle I've ever drawn.

Starting at the front door of our row house on Capitol Hill, I walked east on F Street and turned south on 8th Street. I crossed East Capitol, the street that bisects the NE and SE quadrants of the city, and turned west on M Street SE. I then completed the circle, which was actually more of a square, by heading north on South Capitol Street. I paused to pray in front of the Capitol for a few minutes. Then I completed the 4.7-mile circle by taking a right turn at Union Station and heading home.

It's hard to describe what I felt when I finished drawing that circle. My feet were sore, but my spirit soared. I felt the same kind of holy confidence the Israelites must have felt when they crossed the Jordan River on dry ground and stepped foot in the Promised Land for the first time. I couldn't wait to see the way God would honor that prayer. That prayer circle had taken nearly three hours to complete because my prayer pace is slower than my normal pace, but God has been answering that three-hour prayer for the past fifteen years.

Since *the day* I drew that prayer circle around Capitol Hill, National Community Church has grown into one church with seven locations around the metro DC area. We're on the verge of launching our first international campus in Berlin, Germany. And God has given us the privilege of influencing tens of thousands of people over the last decade and a half.

All Bets Are Off

As I look over my shoulder, I'm grateful for the miracles God has done, and I'm keenly aware of the fact that every miracle has a genealogy. If you trace those miracles all the way back to their origin, you'll find a prayer circle. Miracles are the by-product of prayers that were prayed *by you or for you*. And that should be all the motivation you need to pray.

God has determined that certain expressions of His power will only be exercised in response to prayer. Simply put, God won't do it

unless you pray for it. We have not because we ask not, or maybe I should say, we have not because we circle not. The greatest tragedy in life is the prayers that go unanswered because they go unasked.

Now here's the good news: If you do pray, all bets are off. You can live with holy anticipation because you never know how or when or where God is going to answer, but I promise you this: He will answer. And His answers are not limited by your requests. We pray out of our ignorance, but God answers out of His omniscience. We pray out of our impotence, but God answers out of His omnipotence. God has the ability to answer the prayers we should have prayed but lacked the knowledge or ability to even ask.

During my prayer walk around Capitol Hill, I drew circles around things I didn't even know how to ask for. Without even knowing it, I drew prayer circles around people who would one day come to faith in Jesus Christ at our coffeehouse on Capitol Hill that wasn't even an idea yet. Without even knowing it, I walked right by a piece of property at 8th Street and Virginia Avenue SE that we would purchase thirteen years later as a result of a \$3 million gift that wasn't even a prayer yet. Without even knowing it, I walked right under a theater marquee on Barracks Row, the main street of Capitol Hill, that we would renovate and reopen as our seventh location fifteen years later.

Those answers are a testament to the power of God and a reminder that if you draw prayer circles, God will answer those prayers somehow, someway, sometime. God has been answering that prayer for fifteen years, and He'll keep answering it forever. Like Honi, your prayers have the potential to change the course of history. It's time to start circling.

The Jericho Miracle

Every book has a backstory. There is a moment when an idea is conceived in the imagination of an author and this idea is destined to become a book. And because I believe the backstory will help you appreciate the story, let me share the genesis of *The Circle Maker*.

During my senior year of college, I developed a voracious appetite for reading. I spent all of my spare cash and spare time on books. Since then, I've read thousands of books on topics ranging from spirituality to neurology to biography to astronomy. Not only are my bookshelves filled to maximum capacity; I have books stacked on top of my shelves as high as I can reach, and books stacked on my floor in precarious piles that look like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. I ran out of shelf space a few years ago, which means that not every book "makes the shelf." I do have one shelf, however, that contains only my favorites, a few dozen of them. One of them is titled *The Book of Legends*.

A collection of stories from the Talmud and Midrash, *The Book of Legends* contains the teachings of Jewish rabbis passed down from generation to generation. Because it contains more than a millennium's worth of wisdom, reading *The Book of Legends* feels like an archaeological dig. I had dug down 202 pages when I stumbled across a story that may as well have been a buried treasure. It was the legend of Honi the circle maker. And it forever changed the way I pray.

I've always believed in the power of prayer. In fact, prayer is the spiritual inheritance I received from my grandparents. I had a grandfather who would kneel by his bedside at night, take off his hearing aid, and pray for his family. He couldn't hear himself without his hearing aid on, but everyone else in the house could. Few things leave

as lasting an impression as hearing someone genuinely intercede for you. And even though he died when I was six, his prayers did not. Our prayers never die. There have been moments in my life when the Spirit of God has whispered to my spirit, *Mark, the prayers of your grandfather are being answered in your life right now.* Those moments rank as the most humbling moments of my life. And after discovering the legend of Honi the circle maker, I realized that my grandfather had been praying circles around me before I was even born.

The legend of Honi the circle maker was like a revelation of the power of prayer. It gave me a new vocabulary, a new imagery, a new methodology. It not only inspired me to pray bold prayers but also helped me pray with more perseverance. I started circling everyone and everything in prayer. I drew particular inspiration from the march around Jericho, when God delivered on a four-hundred-year-old promise by providing the first victory in the Promised Land. While the story doesn't explicitly mention the people taking up positions of prayer, I have no doubt that the Israelites were praying as they circled the city. Isn't that what you instinctively do when you face a challenge that is way beyond your ability? The image of the Israelites circling Jericho for seven days is a moving picture of what drawing prayer circles looks like. It's also the backdrop for this book.

Jericho March

The first glimpse of Jericho was both awe-inspiring and frightening. While wandering in the wilderness for forty years, the Israelites had never seen anything approximating the skyline of Jericho. The closer they got, the smaller they felt. They finally understood why the generation before them felt like grasshoppers and failed to enter the Promised Land because of fear.

A six-foot-wide lower wall and fifty-foot-high upper wall encircled the ancient metropolis. The mud-brick walls were so thick and tall that the twelve-acre city appeared to be an impregnable fortress. It seemed like God had promised something impossible, and His battle plan seemed nonsensical: *Your entire army is to march around the city*

once a day for six days. On the seventh day you are to march around the city seven times.

Every soldier in the army had to have wondered why. Why not use a battering ram? Why not scale the walls? Why not cut off the water supply or shoot flaming arrows over the walls? Instead, God told the Israelite army to silently circle the city. And He promised, after they circled thirteen times over seven days, the wall would fall.

The first time around, the soldiers must have felt a little foolish. But with each circle, their stride grew longer and stronger. With each circle, a holy confidence was building pressure inside their souls. By the seventh day, their faith was ready to pop. They arose before dawn and started circling at six o'clock in the morning. At three miles per hour, each mile-and-a-half march around the city took a half hour. By nine o'clock, they began their final lap. In keeping with God's command, they hadn't said a word in six days. They just silently circled the promise. Then the priests sounded their horns, and a simultaneous shout followed. Six hundred thousand Israelites raised a holy roar that registered on the Richter scale, and the walls came tumbling down.

After seven days of circling Jericho, God delivered on a four-hundred-year-old promise. He proved, once again, that His promises don't have expiration dates. And Jericho stands, and falls, as a testament to this simple truth: If you keep circling the promise, God will ultimately deliver on it.

What Is Your Jericho?

This miracle is a microcosm.

It not only reveals the way God performed this particular miracle; it also establishes a pattern to follow. It challenges us to confidently circle the promises God has given to us. And it begs the question: What is your Jericho?

For the Israelites, Jericho symbolized the fulfillment of a dream that originated with Abraham. It was the first step in claiming the Promised Land. It was the miracle they had been hoping for and waiting for their entire lives.

What is your Jericho?

What promise are you praying around? What miracle are you marching around? What dream does your life revolve around?

Drawing prayer circles starts with identifying your Jericho. You've got to define the promises God wants you to stake claim to, the miracles God wants you to believe for, and the dreams God wants you to pursue. Then you need to keep circling until God gives you what He wants and He wills. That's the goal. Now here's the problem: Most of us don't get what we want simply because we don't know what we want. We've never circled any of God's promises. We've never written down a list of life goals. We've never defined success for ourselves. And our dreams are as nebulous as cumulus clouds.

Instead of drawing circles, we draw blanks.

Circling Jericho

More than a thousand years after the Jericho miracle, another miracle happened in the exact same place. Jesus is on His way out of Jericho when two blind men hail Him like a taxi: "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" The disciples see it as a human interruption. Jesus sees it as a divine appointment. So He stops and responds with a pointed question: "What do you want me to do for you?"

Seriously? Is that question even necessary? Isn't it obvious what they want? They're blind. Yet Jesus forced them to define exactly what they wanted from Him. Jesus made them verbalize their desire. He made them spell it out, but it wasn't because Jesus didn't know what they wanted; He wanted to make sure *they knew* what they wanted. And that is where drawing prayer circles begins: knowing what to circle.

What if Jesus were to ask you this very same question: *What do you want me to do for you?* Would you be able to spell out the promises, miracles, and dreams God has put in your heart? I'm afraid many of us would be dumbfounded. We have no idea what we want God to do for us. And the great irony, of course, is that if we can't answer this question, then we're as blind spiritually as these blind men were physically.

So while God is for us, most of us have no idea what we want God

to do for us. And that's why our prayers aren't just boring to us; they are uninspiring to God. If faith is being sure of what we hope for, then being unsure of what we hope for is the antithesis of faith, isn't it? Well-developed faith results in well-defined prayers, and well-defined prayers result in a well-lived life.

If you read this book without answering this question, you will have missed the point. Like the two blind men outside Jericho, you need an encounter with the Son of God. You need an answer to the question He is still asking: What do you want me to do for you?

Obviously, the answer to this question changes over time. We need different miracles during different seasons of life. We pursue different dreams during different stages of life. We stake claim to different promises in different situations. It's a moving target, but you have to start somewhere. Why not right here, right now?

Don't just read the Bible. Start circling the promises.

Don't just make a wish. Write down a list of God-glorifying life goals.

Don't just pray. Keep a prayer journal.

Define your dream.

Claim your promise.

Spell your miracle.

Spell It Out

Jericho is spelled many different ways. If you have cancer, it's spelled *healing*. If your child is far from God, it's spelled *salvation*. If your marriage is falling apart, it's spelled *reconciliation*. If you have a vision beyond your resources, it's spelled *provision*. But whatever it is, you have to spell it out. Sometimes Jericho is spelled without letters. It's a zip code you're called to or a dollar figure that will get you out of debt. And sometimes Jericho has the same spelling as someone's name. For me, Jericho has three different spellings: Parker, Summer, and Josiah.

When my friend Wayne and his wife, Diane, were expecting their first child, they started praying for their baby. They believed prayer was their primary parental responsibility, so why wait till their baby

was born? Every evening, Wayne would lay hands on Diane's stomach and pray the promises in Scripture that they had circled for their baby. During the early stages of pregnancy, they came across a book that said it was never too early to start praying for their baby's future spouse. At first it seemed odd praying for a spouse before they even knew the gender of their baby, but they prayed for their baby and their baby's spouse day after day until their due date.

Wayne and Diane decided to wait until birth to discover their baby's gender, but they prayed that God would reveal what the baby's name should be. In October 1983, the Lord gave them a girl's name. It was spelled Jessica. Then in December, the Lord gave them a boy's name, and they started praying for Timothy. They weren't sure why God had given them two different names, but they prayed circles around both Jessica and Timothy until Diane gave birth.

On May 5, 1984, God answered their prayers, and the answer was spelled Timothy. Wayne and Diane continued to circle their son in prayer, but they also kept praying for the girl that he would one day marry. Twenty-two years and two weeks of accumulated prayers culminated on May 19, 2006—the day Timothy's bride walked down the aisle. Her name? Jessica.

Here's the rest of the story.

Their future daughter-in-law was born on October 19, 1983, the same month that God gave them the name Jessica. A thousand miles away, Wayne and Diane were praying for her by name. They thought Jessica would be their daughter, not their daughter-in-law, but God always has a surprise up His sovereign sleeve. For Wayne and Diane, Jericho has two spellings—Timothy and Jessica—but the same last name.

In case you're wondering, Timothy was allowed to date girls who weren't named Jessica! Wayne and Diane didn't even tell Timothy that God had given them the name of his future spouse before he was born until after he was engaged.

I have the joy of serving as Timothy and Jessica's pastor. So while Timothy and Jessica are the primary beneficiaries of their parents' prayers, I'm a secondary beneficiary. They have been a huge blessing

to National Community Church as small group leaders, and like every blessing, it traces back to a prayer circle.

Vague Prayers

A few years ago, I read one sentence that changed the way I pray. The author, pastor of one of the largest churches in Seoul, Korea, wrote, “God does not answer vague prayers.” When I read that statement, I was immediately convicted by how vague my prayers were. Some of them were so vague that there was no way of knowing whether God had answered them or not.

It was during this spiritual season, when God was challenging me to spell out my prayers with greater specificity, that I embarked on a ten-day Pentecost fast. Just like the 120 believers who prayed in an upper room for ten days, I felt led to fast and pray for ten days leading up to the day of Pentecost. My rationale was pretty simple: If we do what they did in the Bible, we might experience what they experienced. You can’t manufacture a miracle like Pentecost, but if you pray for ten days, a miracle like Pentecost might just happen.

During that ten-day Pentecost fast, I was teaching a series at our church on miracles, and we had just experienced one. We miraculously purchased a piece of Promised Land that we had circled in prayer for more than five years. We took stones that had been laid in the foundation and gave one to everyone as tangible tokens of the corporate miracle God had performed for National Community Church. Drawing on that corporate faith, we challenged people to personalize the question Jesus posed to the two blind men outside of Jericho: What do you want me to do for you? Then we wrote down our holy desires on those stones. I spelled out seven miracles and started circling them in prayer.

In the spirit of full disclosure, not all seven of the miracles I asked for have happened. In fact, one of them even seemed to backfire. I asked God to give us the movie theaters at Union Station where our church met for more than a decade, but instead of giving us the theaters, He took them away. The theaters were unexpectedly closed down, and we were given less than one week’s notice to vacate. It was

extremely disappointing and disorienting at the time, but I have to admit that this apparent “anti-miracle” was the catalyst for some bigger and better miracles that have happened in its wake. What seemed like the wrong answer turned out to be the best answer. So not every prayer will be answered the way we script it, but I’m convinced of this: The miracles that have happened would not have happened if I hadn’t drawn a circle around them in the first place.

The more faith you have, the more specific your prayers will be. And the more specific your prayers are, the more glory God receives. Like Honi, who prayed for a specific type of rain, nuanced prayers give God an opportunity to reveal more shades of His sovereignty. If our prayers aren’t specific, however, God gets robbed of the glory that He deserves because we second-guess whether or not He actually answered them. We never know if the answers were the result of specific prayer or general coincidences that would have happened anyway.

That stone with seven miracles written on it sits on a shelf in my office. Occasionally I’ll pick it up and hold it in my hand while I pray. There isn’t anything magical about it, but it acts as prayer insurance. It insures that I don’t forget what I’m praying for. It also insures that God gets the glory when the miracles happen. When you spell out your prayers with specificity, it will eventually spell God’s glory.

The Ladder of Success

It’s easy to get so busy climbing the ladder of success that we fail to realize that the ladder is not leaning against the wall of Jericho. We lose sight of our God-ordained goals. Our eternal priorities get subjugated to our temporal responsibilities. And we pawn our God-given dream for the American dream. So instead of circling Jericho, we end up wandering in the wilderness for forty years.

A few years ago, I enjoyed a rare day with no agenda. I had just dropped off my family at LAX after a wonderful spring break in southern California. I stayed behind to speak at a leadership conference, but I had one day in between with nowhere to go and nothing to

do, so I found a Starbucks along the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica and spent the day circling Jericho.

That margin, along with a little California sunshine, made room for an epiphany. As I sipped my White Chocolate Mocha, it dawned on me that I had never really defined success for myself. I had written a couple books and started traveling on the speaking circuit, but neither of those goals was as fulfilling as I thought they would be. I often felt excitement mixed with a profound sadness as I scrambled through airport security on my way to whatever speaking destination was next. My life reminded me of the joke I would sometimes tell about the airline pilot who came over the intercom and said, “I have good news and bad news. The bad news is we’re lost; the good news is we’re making great time.” That’s what my life felt like, but it wasn’t a joke.

I’ve never met anyone who doesn’t want to be successful, but very few people have actually spelled out success for themselves. We inherit a family definition or adopt a cultural definition. But if you don’t spell it out for yourself, you have no way of knowing if you’ve achieved it. You might achieve your goals only to realize that they should not have been your goals in the first place. You circle the wrong city. You climb the wrong ladder.

Variant Spellings

As window-shoppers strolled up and down the promenade, I scribbled a personal definition of success on a napkin. That napkin may as well have been a stone tablet inscribed by the finger of God on Mount Sinai. God redefined success and spelled it out for me on that napkin. Like definitions in the dictionary that capture different dimensions of a word, I jotted down three variant spellings.

The first definition may sound generic, but it’s specific to any and every situation:

1. Do the best you can with what you have where you are. Success is not circumstantial. We usually focus on what we’re doing or where we’re going, but God’s primary concern is *who we’re becoming* in the process. We talk about “doing” the will of God, but the will of God has

much more to do with “being” than “doing.” It’s not about being in the right place at the right time; it’s about being the right person, even if you find yourself in the wrong circumstances. Success has nothing to do with how gifted or how resourced you are; it has everything to do with glorifying God in any and every situation by making the most of it. Success is spelled stewardship, and stewardship is spelled success.

The second definition I wrote down captures my calling. Whether I’m writing or preaching or parenting, this is the driving passion of my life:

2. Help people maximize their God-given potential. Potential is God’s gift to us; what we do with it is our gift back to God. Helping people maximize their God-given potential is why God put me on this planet. That is what gets me up early and keeps me up late. Nothing is more exhilarating to me than seeing people grow into their God-given giftedness.

The third definition reveals the deepest desire of my heart:

3. My desire is that the people who know me the best respect me the most. Success is not measured by how many people I pastor or how many books I sell; success is living life with such authentic integrity that those who know me best actually respect me most. I couldn’t care less about fame or fortune. I want to be famous in my home. That is the greatest fortune.

If you don’t have a personal definition of success, chances are you will succeed at the wrong thing. You’ll get to the end of your life and realize that you spelled success wrong. And if you spell it wrong, you’ll get it wrong.

You need to circle the goals God wants you to go after, the promises God wants you to claim, and the dreams God wants you to pursue. And once you spell Jericho, you need to circle it in prayer. Then you need to keep circling until the walls come tumbling down.

Get Outside the Walls

Circling Jericho gave the Israelites a 360-degree perspective of the walled promise. It helped them wrap their spirits around the mud-brick miracle. It gave definition to the fifty-foot-high dream. That is

precisely what prayer does. It helps you get outside the problem. It helps you circle the miracle. It helps you see all the way around the situation.

Don't read this book without finding a time and finding a place to circle Jericho. Take a prayer retreat. Take a prayer journal. And take off. Get alone with God, or if you're wired for interpersonal processing over personal processing, then take some friends with you. They can form a prayer circle around you.

If you can, go someplace that inspires you. A change in scenery often translates into a change of perspective. A change in routine often results in revelation. In formulaic terms, change of pace + change of place = change of perspective.

I've always subscribed to Arthur McKinsey's method of problem solving. I think of it as *prayer solving*.

If you think of a problem as being like a medieval walled city, then a lot of people will attack it head-on, like a battering ram. They will storm the gates and try to smash through the defenses with sheer intellectual power and brilliance. I just camp outside the city. I wait. And I think. Until one day — maybe after I've turned to a completely different problem — the drawbridge comes down and the defenders say, "We surrender." The answer to the problem comes all at once.

The Israelites didn't conquer Jericho because of a brilliant military strategy or brute force. They learned how to let the Lord fight their battles for them. Drawing prayer circles is far more powerful than any battering ram. It doesn't just knock down doors; it fells fifty-foot walls.

When I retrace the miracles in my own life, I'm amazed at how many of them happened outside the city walls. They didn't happen during a planning meeting; they happened during a prayer meeting. It wasn't problem solving that won the day; it was prayer solving. I got outside the city walls and marched around the promise, around the problem, around the situation. And when you do that, it won't just be the drawbridge that drops; the wall will fall.

Praying Through

Before there was a Mother Teresa there was a Mother Dabney. In 1925, Elizabeth J. Dabney and her husband went to work for a mission in the City of Brotherly Love, but there wasn't much love in her neighborhood. It was a hellhole. Her husband was called to preach. Her portfolio was prayer, but she didn't just pray; she *prayed through*.

One afternoon as she was thinking about a bad situation in their North Philly neighborhood, she asked God if He would give them a spiritual victory if she covenanted with Him to pray. He promised that He would, and she felt the Lord prompting her to meet Him the next morning at the Schuylkill River at 7:30 a.m. sharp. Mother Dabney was so nervous about missing her prayer appointment that she stayed up all night crocheting.

The next morning she went down to the river outside the city walls, and the Lord said, "This is the place." The presence of God overshadowed her. And she drew a circle in the sand:

Lord, if You will bless my husband in the place You sent him to establish Your name, if You will break the bonds and destroy the middle wall of partition, if You will give him a church and congregation — a credit to Your people and all Christendom — I will walk with You for three years in prayer, both day and night. I will meet You every morning at 9:00 a.m. sharp; You will never have to wait for me; I will be there to greet You. I will stay there all day; I will devote all of my time to You.

Furthermore, if You will listen to the voice of my supplication and break through in that wicked neighborhood and bless my

husband, I will fast seventy-two hours each week for two years. While I am going through the fast, I will not go home to sleep in my bed. I will stay in church, and if I get sleepy, I'll rest on newspapers and carpet.

As soon as she made that prayer covenant, it was like a cloudburst. God's glory fell from heaven like the raindrops that drenched Honi on *the day* he drew his circle in the sand. Every morning at 9:00 a.m., Mother Dabney greeted the Lord with a hearty, "Good morning, Jesus." She wore the skin off her numb knees, but God extended His powerful right arm. She fasted seventy-two hours each week, but the Holy Spirit was her direct supply.

Soon the mission was too small to accommodate the people. Her husband asked her to pray for another meeting place nearby. She prayed, and a man who had been in business for twenty-five years closed up shop so they could rent the building. Mother Dabney would not be denied. She was a circle maker, and circle makers have a sanctified stubborn streak.

Mother Dabney was more comfortable in the presence of God than the presence of people. As it was with Honi, some even criticized the way she prayed. Well-meaning friends begged her to take a break or take a bite, but she held on to the horns of the altar. And the more she prayed through, the more God came through.

Mother Dabney's prayer legacy would be a long-forgotten footnote if it weren't for one headline. The *Pentecostal Evangel* published her testimony under the title "What It Means to Pray Through." That one article sparked a prayer movement all around the world. Mother Dabney received more than three million letters from people who wanted to know how to pray through.

Counterfactual Theory

Circle makers are history makers.

In the grand scheme of God's story, there is a footnote behind every headline. The footnote is prayer. And if you focus on the footnotes, God will write the headlines. It's your prayers that change the eternal

plotline. Just like Honi's prayer that saved a generation, your prayers can change the course of His-story.

I love history, and in particular, a branch of history called counterfactual theory. Counterfactual theorists ask the *what if* questions. For example, what if the American Revolution had failed? Or what if Hitler had been victorious in World War II? How would history have unfolded? What would that alternate reality look like? And what are the key footnotes that would have or could have changed the headlines of history?

Reading biblical history like a counterfactual theorist is an interesting exercise. And the Jericho miracle is a great example. What if the Israelites had stopped circling on the sixth day? The answer is obvious. They would have forfeited the miracle right before it happened. If they had stopped circling after twelve round trips, they would have done a lot of walking for nothing. Like the generation before them, they would have defaulted on the promise. And the same is true for us.

I've already stated our primary problem: Most of us don't get what we want because we don't know what we want. Here's our secondary problem: *Most of us don't get what we want because we quit circling.*

We give up too easily. We give up too soon. We quit praying right before the miracle happens.

Praying for versus Praying through

Our generation desperately needs to rediscover the difference between *praying for* and *praying through*. There are certainly circumstances where praying for something will get the job done. I believe in short prayers before meals because, quite frankly, I believe in eating food while it's still hot. But there are also situations where you need to grab hold of the horns of the altar and refuse to let go until God answers. Like Honi, you refuse to move from the circle until God moves. You intercede until God intervenes.

Praying through is all about consistency. It's circling Jericho so many times it makes you dizzy. Like the story Jesus told about the persistent widow who drove the judge crazy with her relentless requests,

praying through won't take no for an answer. Circle makers know that it's always too soon to quit praying because you never know when the wall is about to fall. You are always only one prayer away from a miracle.

Praying through is all about intensity. It's not quantitative; it's qualitative. Drawing prayer circles involves more than words; it's gut-wrenching groans and heartbreaking tears. Praying through doesn't just bend God's ear; it touches the heart of your heavenly Father.

I recently attended the president's Easter prayer breakfast at the White House, along with a couple hundred religious leaders from across the country. Before breakfast, a seventy-six-year-old African-American preacher who served alongside Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement said a prayer. I could barely hear his words, but his faith was loud and clear. He prayed with such a familiarity with the Father that it was convicting. It's like his words were deep-fried in the faithfulness of God. After he said amen, I turned to my pastor-friends, Andy Stanley and Louie Giglio, and said, "I feel like I've never prayed before." I felt like he knew God in a way that I didn't, and it challenged me to get closer to God. I wonder if that's how the disciples felt when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. His prayers were so qualitatively different that they felt like they had never prayed before.

When was the last time you found yourself flat on your face before the Almighty? When was the last time you cut off your circulation kneeling before the Lord? When was the last time you pulled an all-nighter in prayer?

There are higher heights and deeper depths in prayer, and God wants to take you there. He wants to take you places you have never been before. There are new dialects. There are new dimensions. But if you want God to do something new in your life, you can't do the same old thing. It will involve more sacrifice, but if you are willing to go there, you'll realize that you didn't sacrifice anything at all. It will involve more risk, but if you are willing to go there, you'll realize that you didn't risk anything at all.

Make the sacrifice.

Take the risk.

Draw the circle.

The Last Piece of Property on Capitol Hill

After the seeming anti-miracle of the movie theaters at Union Station closing, our church began pursuing property on Capitol Hill to build an urban campus that would include a coffeehouse, performance theater, and centralized offices for our multisite staff. With a going price of \$14 million an acre and the relative scarcity of developable properties on the Hill, I wondered if we were looking for something that didn't exist. After an exhaustive search, we only found one piece of property that met our specifications, so we dubbed it "the last piece of property on Capitol Hill." Strategically situated where Capitol Hill, the Navy Yard, and Riverfront communities intersect, the location was absolutely perfect. And the front of the property faced the I-295/395 expressway that is the main artery running through the heart of DC, giving it unbeatable visibility and accessibility.

The first time I set foot on that property at the corner of 8th Street and Virginia Avenue SE, I felt like I was standing on Promised Land. For several weeks, I silently circled that city block in prayer like the soldiers who marched around Jericho. Then, just before making an official offer, our executive leadership team met our realtor at the property for one last look. We were filled with excitement as we dreamed about the possibilities, but our dreams were dashed less than twenty minutes later when our realtor called to inform me that a real estate developer had put a contract on the property *as we had been standing on it.*

I was deeply disappointed because I had already envisioned our new campus on that site. I was deeply confused because I felt like it was where God wanted us. But we should praise God for disappointment because it drives us to our knees. Disappointment is like dream defibrillation. If we respond to it the right way, disappointment can actually restore our prayer rhythm and resurrect our dreams.

Later on that evening, our family knelt in prayer. One of our children prayed a simple prayer: "God, I pray that this property would be used for Your glory." At that moment, my faith found a heartbeat. I sensed in my spirit that God was going to give us that property. I

believed it would belong to us because I knew that it belonged to God. So for three months we circled that property in prayer. I marched around that block like the Israelites marched around Jericho. I knelt on the property. I laid hands on the old glass company that had occupied the lot since 1963. I even removed my shoes, just like Joshua did before the battle of Jericho, because I believed it was holy ground.

Out of Luck

At the end of the sixty-day feasibility period, the real estate developer who held the primary contract on the property asked for ten additional days to secure financing. That seemed like our window of opportunity so we offered a nonrefundable deposit, and the owner told us he would give us the contract. We thought God had answered our prayers, but we weren't done circling. Twenty-four hours later, the owner changed his mind, and we lost the contract a second time.

Finally, at the end of the ten-day extension, I anxiously awaited word from our realtor. I was hoping that the third time would be a charm — not three strikes and you're out. I got the text on a Friday night while our family was at the theater watching *The Karate Kid*. I was enjoying the remake of the original movie, but his text message ruined it for me. He double-thumbed the bad news: "We're out of luck." Then this Spirit-inspired thought fired across my synapses: We may be out of luck, but we're not out of prayer.

Despite losing the contract a third time, I somehow still believed that God was going to defy the odds and give us our Promised Land. Sometimes faith seems like a denial of reality, but that's because we're holding on to a reality that is more real than the reality we can perceive with our five senses. We didn't have a physical contract on that property, but we had a spiritual contract on it via prayer. And a spiritual contract is more binding than a written contract.

A few days after our third strike, I flew to Peru to hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu with my son, Parker. For four days we were out of communication with civilization. When we arrived at Aguas Calientes, a small town at the foot of the Andes Mountain range, I

called Lora from a public telephone booth. I'm sure onlookers wondered why a large American was jumping up and down inside a small telephone booth, but I was overwhelmed by the news Lora shared with me: *We got the contract!* I couldn't believe it, but I could believe it. We prayed through, and God came through.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the circumstances. It's almost like God said, *Let's get Mark out of the way so we can get this deal done.* In retrospect, I think God wanted me out of the country and out of communication so there was no mistaking it for what it was: a Jericho miracle.

Praise Through

Now let me backtrack. Let me reverse-engineer this miracle. Let me retrace the prayer circle.

During the feasibility period, when the real estate developer had the primary contract on the property, I was rereading the story of the Jericho miracle, and I noticed something I had never seen before. During devotions one day, one phrase jumped off the page and into my spirit:

Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. Then the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands."

Did you catch the verb tense? God speaks in the *past tense*, not the *future tense*. He doesn't say, "I will deliver." God says, "I have delivered." The significance is this: The battle was won before the battle even began. God had already given them the city. All they had to do was circle it.

As I read this story, I felt as though the Spirit of God said to my spirit, "Stop praying for it and start praising me for it." True faith doesn't just celebrate *ex post facto*, after the miracle has already happened; true faith celebrates before the miracle happens, as if the miracle has already happened, because you know that you know that God is going to deliver on His promise.

This is going to sound sacrilegious, but sometimes you need to

quit praying. After you pray through, you need to *praise through*. You need to quit asking God to do something and start praising Him for what He had already done. Prayer and praise are both expressions of faith, but praise is a higher dimension of faith. Prayer is asking God to do something, future tense; praise is believing that God has already done it, past tense.

Before you write this off as some “name it, claim it” scheme, let me remind you that God cannot be bribed or blackmailed. God doesn’t do miracles to satisfy our selfish whims. God does miracles for one reason and one reason alone: to spell His glory. We just happen to be the beneficiaries.

Keep Circling Jericho

Not long after making this devotional discovery, I shared this past-tense principle with our church. We literally stopped praying that God would give us the property. We started praising Him for it because we felt like God had promised it. The following week, I received an e-mail from a couple who had the same revelation. For many years, they had prayed to get pregnant. Then they stopped praying and started praising because they felt in their spirit that God had promised them children. And when God gives you a promise, you need to praise Him for it.

That’s exactly what God led us to do: stop praying and start praising Him for what He was about to do. We were infertile for five years, but God had already told me I would one day be a mother. In year three of being infertile, I started praising Him for the children he was going to give us instead of pleading for children. Today we have eight precious children that God has blessed us with through both birth and adoption. I have no doubt it is because I started praising Him. It was a true sign to Him that I believed He would give us children — and He did.

There are moments in life when you need to stop pleading and start praising. If God has put a promise in your heart, praise Him for it. You need to celebrate as if it has already happened. You need to

stop asking, because God has already answered. And for the record, even if God doesn't answer the way you want, you still need to praise through. That is when it's most difficult to praise God, but that is also when our praise is most pure and most pleasing to God.

Right after God gave me this revelation, I went over to the property we were praying for, got down on my knees, and started praising God for the promise He had put in my heart. We lost that contract three separate times, but we kept praising God. The deal died three times, but resurrection is the central tenet of the Christian faith. And it isn't something we just celebrate on Easter. Resurrection is something we celebrate every day in every way. Prayer has the power to resurrect dead dreams and give them new life — eternal life.

I'm not sure what promise God has put in your heart. I don't know what dream you're holding on to or what miracle you're holding out for, but I offer this exhortation: Keep circling Jericho.

And don't just pray through; praise through.

The Circle Maker

Praying Circles Around Your Biggest Dreams and Greatest Fears

by Mark Batterson

A New York Times bestseller! According to Pastor Mark Batterson in his book, *The Circle Maker*, “Drawing prayer circles around our dreams isn’t just a mechanism whereby we accomplish great things for God. It’s a mechanism whereby God accomplishes great things in us.”

Do you ever sense that there’s far more to prayer, and to God’s vision for your life, than what you’re experiencing? It’s time you learned from the legend of Honi the Circle Maker—a man bold enough to draw a circle in the sand and not budge from inside it until God answered his prayers for his people.

What impossibly big dream is God calling you to draw a prayer circle around? Sharing inspiring stories from his own experiences as a circle maker, Mark Batterson will help you uncover your heart’s deepest desires and God-given dreams and unleash them through the kind of audacious prayer that God delights to answer.

Get Your Copy of *The Circle Maker!*

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