

The Circle Maker: Sermon 4

Text: *Daniel 10:12–13*

Reading: *The Circle Maker*, chapters 12-18

## Introduction

On the Swedish Island of Visingsö, there is a mysterious forest of oak trees; mysterious because oak trees aren't indigenous to the island and its origin was unknown for more than a century. Then in 1980, the Swedish Navy received a letter from the Forestry Department reporting that their requested ship lumber was ready. The Navy didn't even know it had ordered any lumber. After a little historical research, it was discovered that in 1829 the Swedish parliament, recognizing that it takes oak trees one hundred and fifty years to mature and anticipating a shortage of lumber at the turn of the 21st century, ordered that twenty thousand oak trees be planted on Visingsö and protected for the Navy.<sup>1</sup>

That is thinking long.

For the record, the lone objector was the Bishop of Strängnäs. He didn't doubt that there would still be wars to fight at the end of the twentieth century. He was the only one who anticipated that ships might be built of other materials by then.

One dimension of *thinking long* is *thinking different* and prayer is the key to both. Prayer doesn't just change circumstances. More importantly, it changes *us*. It doesn't just alter external realities. It alters internal realities so that we see with spiritual eyes. It gives us peripheral vision. It corrects our nearsightedness. It enables us to see beyond our circumstances, beyond ourselves, beyond time.

It's not enough to *dream big* and *pray hard*. You also have to *think long*. If you don't, you'll experience high degrees of discouragement. Why? Because we tend to *overestimate what we can accomplish in a year*. Of course, we also tend to *underestimate what we can accomplish in a decade*. The bigger the vision, the harder you'll have to pray and the longer you'll have to think. But if you keep circling, it'll come to pass in God's time.

Illustration:

Share about a big dream that will take a long time to accomplish—either personal or corporate. Example from *The Circle Maker*: the 2020 vision of National Community Church in twenty locations by the year 2020 (*TCM*, page 136).

Text: Daniel 10:12–13

*Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come.*

Context:

Can you imagine having a conversation with your guardian angel? It'll be one of our most revealing conversations when we get to heaven, but Daniel got to have a short conversation on this side of the space-time continuum. For some of us, it'll be an awfully long conversation because we kept our angel awfully busy. That is certainly true of Daniel. I can't help but wonder if they had a little side conversation about the lions' den.

Like all angelic greetings, it begins with *do not be afraid*. I guess that's angelic protocol. Then the angel reveals the realities of the spiritual realm in a way that is seen nowhere else in Scripture. We know that *our struggle is not against flesh and blood*, but this encounter fleshes it out. The angel reveals the importance of praying through. The angel reveals the spiritual warfare that is being waged beyond the curtain of our consciousness. The angel reveals the way prayers are processed.

Daniel's prayer was heard before the words even passed through his vocal chords, but it wasn't until the twenty-first day that he experienced a breakthrough because of spiritual oppression. An evil spirit known as the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted the call for angelic backup until the twenty-first day.

I can't help but ask the counterfactual question: what if Daniel had quit praying through on day twenty? Well, just like the Israelites who circled Jericho or Elijah who got down on his knees and prayed for rain, if you stop praying through *before* the breakthrough, then you forfeit the miracle.

### **To Their Knees**

Daniel ranks as one of the most brilliant minds the ancient world has ever known. He was a Renaissance man two thousand years before the Renaissance, with an unusual aptitude for both philosophy and science. He could explain riddles and solve problems unlike anyone in his generation, and no one could dream or interpret dreams like Daniel. But the thing that set him apart wasn't his *IQ*. It was his

*PQ.* Daniel prayed circles around the greatest superpower on earth, and because he got on his knees, he brought kings and kingdoms to their knees.

Daniel didn't just pray when he had a bad day. He prayed every day. He didn't just dial up 911 prayers when he was in a lions' den. Prayer was part of the rhythm and routine of his life. Prayer was his life and his life was a prayer.

I'm sure Daniel prayed with a greater degree of intensity right before he was thrown into the lions' den, but that intensity was the by-product of consistency. He approached every situation, every opportunity, every challenge, and every person prayerfully. And it was that *prayerful posture* that led to one of the most unlikely rises to power in political history. How does a Prisoner of War become Prime Minister of the country that took him captive in the first place?

*Only God.*

The ascendance of Daniel defies political science, but it defines the power of prayer circles. Prayer invites God into the equation, and when that happens, all bets are off. It doesn't matter whether it's the locker room, the boardroom, or the classroom. It doesn't matter whether you practice law or medicine or music. It doesn't matter *who* you are or *what* you do. If you stop, drop, and pray, then you never know where you'll go, what you'll do, or who you'll meet.

### **Stop, Drop, and Pray**

Illustration:

Share about your favorite places to pray. Example from the Circle Maker: the rooftop of Ebenezer's Coffeehouse (*TCM*, page 157).

One of my favorite paintings at the National Gallery of Art is the larger-than life portrait of Daniel in the Lions' Den by Flemish artist, Sir Peter Paul Rubens. Daniel is ripped to the point of steroid suspicion, and who knows, maybe it's an accurate depiction, but far greater than his external physique was his internal fortitude. His persistence quotient was unparalleled and it's evidenced by his habit of getting on his knees three times a day and praying through an open window toward Jerusalem. Even when King Darius outlawed prayer, Daniel continued the stop, drop, and pray three times a day.

Few people prayed with more consistency or intensity than Daniel, and what makes his persistence in prayer so remarkable is that he knew that his dream of rebuilding Jerusalem wouldn't be fulfilled during his lifetime. He prayed toward the city that he knew He'd never see with his physical eyes, but he saw it with his spiritual eyes.

Daniel prophesied that it would take *seventy sevens* or what amounted to our seventy years.

*Is it possible for man to dream continuously for seventy years?*

Daniel did just that. He never stopped *dreaming big* or *praying hard* because he was *thinking long*. That is what prophets do. He wasn't just looking beyond the Babylonian captivity to the restoration of Jerusalem. He was looking even further into the future to the first coming and second coming of Jesus Christ. Daniel was thinking in terms of millenniums. His prayers and prophecies were the seeds of our salvation, and we reap those blessings until Christ returns.

The thing that impresses me about Daniel is this: he knew that his prayers wouldn't be answered for seventy sevens yet he prayed with a sense of urgency. As a procrastinator, I would have been tempted to wait until the last week of the sixty-ninth year to even start praying. Not Daniel. He had the ability to pray with urgency about things that weren't urgent. That is an important dimension of thinking long.

Drawing prayer circles often feels like a *long and boring* process and it's frustrating when you feel like you've been circling forever. You start to wonder if God really hears, if God really cares. Sometimes His silence is deafening. We circle the cancer. We circle our children. We circle the dream. But it doesn't seem to be making a difference. What do you do? My advice: stop, drop, and pray. Keep circling. Circle for seventy years if you have to! What else are you going to do? Where else are you going to turn? What other options do you have? Pray through.

We live in a culture that overvalues fifteen minutes of fame and undervalues lifelong faithfulness. Maybe we have it backwards? Just as our greatest successes often come on the heels of our greatest failures, our greatest answers often come on the heels of our longest and most boring prayers. But if you pray *long and boring* prayers, *your life will be anything but boring*. Your life will turn into the spiritual adventure it was destined to be. It won't always get you where you want to go, but it will get you through.

## **Prayer Postures**

Physical posture is an important part of prayer. It's a like a prayer within a prayer. Posture is to prayer what tone is to communication. If words are *what* you say, then posture is *how* you say it. There is a reason why Scripture prescribes a wide variety of postures like *kneeling*, *falling prostrate on your face*, *the laying on of hands*, and *anointing the head with oil*. Physical postures help posture our hearts and minds.

When you *raise your hands* in worship, it symbolizes your surrender to God. Sometimes you raise a *clenched fist* to celebrate what Christ has accomplished for

you on the cross; you are declaring the victory He has won. When you *drop to your knees*, you are demonstrating your dependence upon the Lord.

Illustration:

Share about different prayer postures you use. Example from *The Circle Maker*: kneeling during Lent with Parker during devotions (*TCM*, page 150).

Application:

The Quakers had a unique way of praying with body posture. It starts out with *hands facing down* symbolizing the things we need to let go of. It involves a process of confessing our sins, rebuking our fears, and relinquishing control. Then we *turn our hands over so they are face up* in a posture of receptivity. We actively receive what God wants to give: joy unspeakable, peace that passes understanding, and unmerited grace. We receive the fruit and gifts of His Spirit with open hands and open hearts.

Try praying corporately with your congregation the way the Quakers did.

There is nothing magical about *the laying on of hands* or *bowing the knee* or *anointing the head with oil*, but there is something biblical about it. There is also something mystical about it. When we practice those prescribed postures, we are doing what has been done for thousands of years and part of thinking long is appreciating the timeless traditions that connect us to our spiritual ancestors.

What goes around comes around. What is in vogue now will eventually be out of vogue and what is out of vogue now will eventually be in vogue. Human tradition is like a swinging pendulum. Singing hymns may be old school, but give it enough time, and singing hymns will be cutting-edge creative once again. One thing I know for sure, *biblical traditions* never go out of style. They are as relevant now as they were in ancient times. And when we practice the prayer postures prescribed in Scripture, it helps us dream big, pray hard, and think long.

### **Daniel Fast**

At critical junctures in life, a Daniel Fast can be extremely effective. It's called a Daniel fast because it's inspired by and patterned after the fasts that Daniel did at critical junctures in his life. It's different than an absolute fast because the diet generally consists of fruits, vegetables, and water. And it is typically done with a specific goal and a defined timeline in mind. It was a ten-day fast that kick-started Daniel's precipitous climb to political power. It was a twenty-one day fast that ended with an angelic encounter.

When you fast and pray in tandem, it's almost like a moving sidewalk that gets you to your desired destination in half the time. Fasting has a way of fast-tracking our prayers. Because fasting is harder than praying, fasting is a form of praying hard. In my experience, it is the shortest distance to a breakthrough.

Application:

Share about a fast you've done recently. Talk about the mistakes made and lessons learned. Then challenge your congregation to close out the 21-day Prayer Challenge with a fast. Give options: a one-day fast, fasting one meal for one week, etc.

### **Empty Stomach**

There is more than one way to draw a prayer circle. In fact, sometimes it involves more than prayer. Fasting is a form of circling. In fact, an empty stomach may be the most powerful prayer posture in Scripture.

Even Jesus said that some miracles are not possible via prayer. Some miracles are only accessible via prayer and fasting. It takes the combination of prayer and fasting to unlock some double dead bolts.

When you have a big decision to make, circle it with a fast. It doesn't just purge your body, it also purges your mind and your spirit. When you need a breakthrough, circle it with a fast. It doesn't just break down the challenges you're facing, it also breaks down the calluses in your heart.

Maybe there is something you've been praying for that you need to start fasting for. You need to take it to the next level. You need to draw a double circle by fasting for your children or fasting for a friend or fasting for your business.

Illustration:

Share about a regular fast you have practiced over the years. Why did you do it? How was it effective? What was the result? Example from *The Circle Maker*: the Daniel Fast that led to seven miracles (*TCM*, pages 165–166).

Closing:

Illustration:

Share about a big challenge you've faced. Relate it to prayer and fasting. Example from *The Circle Maker*: hiking Half Dome (*TCM*, pages 193–194).

Drawing prayer circles is a lot like climbing a mountain. The dream or promise or miracle may seem impossible, but if you keep circling, anything is possible. With each prayer, there is a small change in elevation. With each prayer, you are one step closer to the answer. And the harder the climb, the sweeter the summit. The same is true with prayer. The more you have to circle something in prayer, the more satisfying it is spiritually. And, often, the more glory God gets.

Too often we approach prayer in an ASAP fashion. We want God to answer our prayers *as soon as possible*. We need a paradigm shift. We need to be willing to pray for *as long as it takes*. Pray that it will take long enough and be hard enough for God to receive all of the glory. Don't look for the path of least resistance. Look for the path of greatest glory. And that requires high-degree-of-difficulty prayers and lots of circling.

Very rarely does our first prayer request hit the bulls-eye of God's good, pleasing, and perfect will. Most prayer requests have to be refined. Even "the prayer that saved a generation" didn't hit the bulls-eye the first time. Honi refined his request twice: "Not for such rain have I prayed." He wasn't satisfied with a sprinkle or torrential downpour. It took three attempts to spell out exactly what he wanted: "the rain of Your favor, blessing, and graciousness." Honi drew a circle in the sand. Then he drew a circle within a circle within a circle.

Application:

What promises or miracles or dreams are you willing to pray for *as long as it takes*? After all, some dreams should be so big that they take a lifetime to fulfill.

Illustration:

Share about something God has put in your heart that you're willing to give you life to. Example from *The Circle Maker*: life goal of experiencing Acts 2:41, 3,000 people baptized in the same place at the same time, once in my life (*TCM*, page 177).

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart Brand, *The Clock of the Long Now*, 162.