

Chapter 1: 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 second half of 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.ⁱ 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 and eighty degrees. Two hundred and seventy degrees. Three hundred and 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 spine of all who were within earshot that day. It wasn't just the volume of his voice. It was the authoritative 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 the consensus amongst eyewitnesses was that no raindrop was less 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 benevolence, benediction, and grace.

Then, like a well-proportioned sun shower on a hot and humid August afternoon, it began to rain in perfect moderation. 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 like 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 withered arm on the Sabbath more than a half century later. Excommunication was threatened, but because the miracle could not be repudiated, Honi was ultimately honored for his act of prayerful bravado. The prayer that ended a drought was deemed one of the most significant prayers in the history of Israel. And the circle became a symbol of the potential of a single prayer to change the course of history.

Chapter 2: 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 ax-head, 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's absolutely imperative at the outset that you come to terms with this simple yet life-changing truth: *God is for you*.ⁱⁱ 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 the other, your small timid prayers or big audacious prayers will change the trajectory of your life and turn you into two totally different people. Your 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. And the ninety-four year-old entrepreneur who drew a circle around his business more than half a century ago and has given away more than \$120 million in profits since then will motivate you to think beyond this life and into eternity.

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's 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 impotent. Sure, you can apply some of the principles you learn in *The Circle Maker* and they might 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 resume, 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 \$2000 a month, and \$1600 of that went to rent the DC public school cafetorium 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. Our inabilities and uncertainties force us to our knees, and when we get on our knees, God extends His Almighty Hand on our behalf.

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 will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.*ⁱⁱⁱ

As I read that promise given to Joshua, I felt like God wanted me to stake claim to the land He had promised us as a church and pray a perimeter all the way around Capitol Hill. I was confident that just as this promise had been transferred from Moses to Joshua, God was transferring this promise to me if I had enough faith to circle it.^{iv} 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 had 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 Promise 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 God's blessings and I'm keenly aware of the fact that every blessing has a genealogy. If you trace them all the way back to their origin, you'll find a prayer circle. Every blessing is the byproduct of prayers that were prayed *by you* or *for you*. And that should be all the motivation you need to pray.

The God of the universe has determined that certain expressions of His power will only be exercised in response to prayer. Simply put: *God won't do it if you don't 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 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 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 that we would renovate and reopen as our seventh location fifteen years later.

Those answers are a testament to the sovereignty of God and a reminder that if you draw prayer circles, God will answer those prayers somehow, someday, 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.