

The Circle Maker Sermon 1

Text: *Joshua 6:1–16*

Reading: The Circle Maker, chapters 1-4

Introduction

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.¹ 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 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 Thy 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 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 had been difficult to believe the day before the day. The day after the day, it was impossible *not* to believe.

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 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.

The Power of a Single Prayer

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.*² 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. 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.

Illustration:

Share your own story of a prayer that changed the course of history or the course of your life. Example from *The Circle Maker*: the 4.7-mile prayer walk around Capitol Hill (*TCM*, pages 14–16).

The Jericho Miracle

Text: *Joshua 6:1–16*

1 Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in.

2 Then the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. 3 March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. 4 Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. 5 When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in."

6 So Joshua son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant of the LORD and have seven priests carry trumpets in front of it." 7 And he ordered the army, "Advance! March around the city, with an armed guard going ahead of the ark of the LORD."

8 When Joshua had spoken to the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets before the LORD went forward, blowing their trumpets, and the ark of the LORD's covenant followed them. 9 The armed guard marched ahead of the priests who blew the trumpets, and the rear guard followed the ark. All this time the trumpets were sounding. 10 But Joshua had commanded the army, "Do not give a war cry, do not raise your voices, do not say a word until the day I tell you to shout. Then shout!" 11 So he had the ark of the LORD carried around the city, circling it once. Then the army returned to camp and spent the night there.

12 Joshua got up early the next morning and the priests took up the ark of the LORD. 13 The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets went forward, marching before the ark of the LORD and blowing the trumpets. The armed men went ahead of them and the rear guard followed the ark of the LORD, while the trumpets kept sounding. 14 So on the second day they marched around the city once and returned to the camp. They did this for six days.

15 On the seventh day, they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner, except that on that day they circled the city seven times. 16 The seventh time around, when the priests sounded the trumpet blast, Joshua commanded the army, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city!"

Context:

A six-foot wide lower wall and fifty-foot high upper wall encircled the ancient metropolis. The mudbrick walls were so thick and so 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.³

Every soldier in the army 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 circling thirteen times over seven days, that the wall would fall.

The first time around, the soldiers 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 mph, each mile-and-a-half march around the city took half an 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 for us to follow. It challenges us to confidently circle the promises God has given to us. And it begs the question: 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 what 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 same exact place. Jesus was 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?*⁴

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 asked 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.

Like the two blind men outside Jerusalem, 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, and 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 life goals.
Don't just pray. Keep a prayer journal.

Define your dream.
Claim your promise
Spell your miracle.

Illustration:

Share a personal story of a dream you defined or promise you claimed or miracle you spelled out. Example from *The Circle Maker*: claiming the promise in Matthew 18:18 and drawing prayer circles for five years around the crack house that became Ebenezer's Coffeehouse (*TCM*, pages 97–100).

Application:

Challenge people to pray with more specificity and consistency by keeping a prayer journal. Writing down our prayers in a journal is a way of insuring that we give God the glory when He answers them. It also forces us to be more defined in our prayers.

Optional Illustration:

Share a personal example of something you've interceded for or a prayer you've written down or a promise you've claimed. Example from *The Circle Maker*: the 10-day Pentecost fast and seven miracles written on a stone (*TCM*, pages 25–26).

The 21-Day Prayer Challenge

Challenge people to do a “prayer experiment.” It's as simple as picking a time and a place, and then identifying something or someone that you are going to pray for daily for 21 days. The goal isn't to force God's hand and make Him answer your prayer within your 21-day timeline. The goal is to establish the habit of drawing prayer circles.

Optional Illustration:

Share the story of *The Game with Minutes*, the prayer experiment conducted by Frank Laubach (*TCM*, pages 159–160).

Optional Idea:

Kick off the 21-day Prayer Challenge with a corporate prayer meeting. Give people a copy of *The Circle Maker* and/or a prayer journal. Then give them guidelines that will help them be successful in their prayer experiment.

Application:

Share practical ideas for the prayer experiment. There can be a corporate church component: praying for a piece of property, praying for revival, praying for your community. You may even want to organize prayer walks around your church, neighborhood, or city. But it should also be personal. Challenge people to identify needs or situations or dreams that require prayer.

Participants can pray around a promise in Scripture for 21 days. You can pray circles around your children or your spouse or an unsaved coworker. You can pray circles around a challenge you're facing or a sin you're struggling with. You can pray circles around a dream God has put in your heart. You can pray circles around a change that needs to happen or a decision that needs to be made.

Conclusion

Illustration:

Tell the story of Mother Dabney (*TCM*, pages 31–32).

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. 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* doesn'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 heart-breaking tears. Praying through doesn't just bend God's ear. It touches the heart of your Heavenly Father.

When was the last time you found yourself flat on your face before the Almighty? When was the last time you cut off 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. Let this prayer experiment, this 21-day prayer challenge; begin a new chapter in your relationship with God.

It's time to start circling.

¹ To read more about Honi, see "The Deeds of the Sages," pages 201–203, in *The Book of Legends*. See also, *Everyman's Talmud* by Abraham Cohen, 277, and *The Treatise Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud* by Henry Malter, 270. NOTE: Honi the Circle Maker is sometimes referred to as Choni the Circle Maker, Honi Ha-Meaggel, and Onias the Rain Maker.

² Romans 8:31.

³ Joshua 6:3–4.

⁴ Matthew 20:29–32.