

## PRAYING THROUGH

**B**efore 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.

## THE CIRCLE MAKER

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.

## PRAYING THROUGH

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 head-lines 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, Lk. 18:1-8 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

## THE CIRCLE MAKER

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.

*Heb 11:1* 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

## PRAYING THROUGH

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,

## PRAYING THROUGH

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.