

Draw the Circle

4. Praying Through

March 4-5, 2017

In standardized math tests, Japanese children consistently score higher than Americans. While some assume that a natural proclivity toward mathematics is the primary difference, researchers discovered that it may have more to do with effort than ability. In one study involving first-graders, students were given a difficult puzzle to solve. The researchers weren't interested in whether or not the children could solve the puzzle; they simply wanted to see how long they would try before giving up. The American children lasted, on average, 9.47 minutes. The Japanese children lasted 13.93 minutes.

In other words, the Japanese children tried 47 percent longer. Is it any wonder why they score higher on math exams? Researchers concluded that the difference in math scores might have less to do with intelligence quotient and more to do with persistence quotient. The Japanese first-graders simply tried harder. That study not only explains the difference in standardized math scores, it also explains that the implications are true no matter where you turn. It doesn't matter whether it's athletics or academics, music or math. There are no shortcuts. There are no substitutes. Success is a derivative of persistence.

More than a decade ago, Anders Ericsson and his colleagues at Berlin's elite Academy of Music did a study with musicians. With the help of professors, they divided violinists into three groups: world-class soloists, good violinists, and those who were unlikely to play professionally. All of them started playing around roughly the same age and they practiced about the same amount of time until the age of eight. That is when their practice habits diverged. The researchers found that by the age of twenty, the average players had logged about 4,000 hours of practice time; the good violinists totaled about 8,000 hours; and the elite performers set the standard with 10,000 hours.

While there is no denying that innate ability dictates some of your upside potential, your potential is only tapped via persistent effort. Persistence is the magic bullet and the magic number seems to be ten thousand.

"The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve a level of mastery associated with being a world class expert— in anything," notes neurologist Daniel Levitin. "In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again. No one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems that it takes the brain that long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery."

Is praying and hearing from God any different? It is a habit to be cultivated. It is a discipline to be developed. It is a skill to be practiced.

Luke 18:1-5 *Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' ⁴ "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!"*

The parable of the persistent widow is one of the most pixilated pictures of prayer in Scripture. It shows us what praying hard looks like: knocking until your knuckles are raw, crying out until your voice is lost, and pleading until your tears run dry. Praying hard is praying through.

The phrase used to describe the widow's persistence, she is wearing me out, is boxing terminology. It's like a heavyweight prayer bout. Praying through is more than words. It's blood, sweat, and tears. Praying through is two-dimensional: **praying like it depends on God and working like it depends on you.**

It's praying until God answers, no matter how long it takes. It's doing whatever it takes on your end to be a part of the solution. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and there is no more desperate act than praying through. There comes a moment when you need to throw caution to the wind and draw a circle in the sand. There comes a moment when you need to defy protocol, drop to your knees, and pray for the impossible. There comes a moment when you need to muster every ounce of faith you have and call down rain from heaven.

For the persistent widow, this was that moment. While we don't know what injustice took place, we do know that the persistent widow wouldn't take no for an answer. That's what made her a circle maker. The judge knew she would circle his house until the day she died if she didn't get justice. The judge knew there was no quit in the persistent widow.

Does God know that about you? How desperate are you for a breakthrough? Desperate enough to pray through the night? How many times are you willing to circle the promise? Until the day you die? How long and loud will you knock on the door of opportunity? Until you knock the door down?

Mark Batterson, the author of "Draw the Circle," talks about how for over 8 years he prayed and fasted and walked circles around an old Crack House in Washington, D.C. Sometimes he felt like the security guards were watching him as he circled the place in prayer because they thought he was casing the crack house.

Mark kept believing that God would give their congregation this building so that they could start a coffee house to reach the lost in their community. The owners wanted

1 million dollars for it. That was way too much money for the congregation that was small at that time. They offered \$350,000 for it. They were outbid by 4 other people. But, somehow they were awarded the contract. Since then, Ebenezer's Coffeehouse has been rated the #1 coffeehouse in D.C. Hundreds of people walk into it each week and it has been a huge launching pad for many people to come to faith in downtown D.C. For over 8 years, Mark and his congregation prayed desperately for this building that they believed would become an epicenter of a spiritual movement in D.C.

If you aren't desperate, you won't take desperate measures. And if you don't pray like it depends on God, the biggest miracles and best promises will remain out of your prayer reach. But if you learn how to pray hard, like the persistent widow, **God will honor your bold prayers because your bold prayers honor God.**

The persistent widow's methodology was unorthodox. She could have, and technically should have, waited for her court date. Going to the personal residence of the judge crossed a professional line. I'm almost surprised the judge didn't get a restraining order against her.

But this reveals something about the nature of God. God couldn't care less about protocol. If He did, Jesus would have chosen the Pharisees as his disciples. But that isn't who Jesus honored. Jesus honored the prostitute who crashed a party at a Pharisee's home to anoint His feet. Jesus honored the tax collector who climbed a tree in his three-piece suit just to get a glimpse of Jesus. Jesus honored the four friends who cut in line and cut a hole in someone's ceiling to help their friend. And in this parable, Jesus honored the woman who drove a judge crazy because she wouldn't stop knocking.

The common denominator in each of these stories is holy desperation. God responds to Holy Desperation. People took desperate measures to get to God and God honored them for it. Nothing has changed.

God is still honoring spiritual desperadoes who crash parties and climb trees. God is still honoring those who defy protocol with their bold prayers. God is still honoring those who pray with audacity and tenacity. And the persistent widow is selected as the gold standard when it comes to praying hard. Her unrelenting persistence was the only difference between justice and injustice.

The viability of our prayers is not contingent on scrabbling the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet into the right combinations like abracadabra. God already knows the last punctuation mark before we pronounce the first syllable. The viability of our prayers has more to do with intensity than vocabulary. That is modeled by the Holy Spirit Himself, who has been intensely and unceasingly interceding for you your entire life.

When I was called into ministry, I enrolled at CCU. I couldn't pay for my college. There was no college fund. So, I took out loans for my first year. I knew that by the time

I got out, I would be so overwhelmed with debt that, like many ministers, I would be tempted constantly to leave the ministry because of the demand to pay off my loans.

Every single day for two years, I prayed desperately for God to take care of my school bills. My prayers were never poetic. I basically said the same thing each day, "God, I need you to take care of my schooling." One day, a man that I did not know asked me out to lunch. Over the course of my meal, he told me that God laid it on his heart to pay for the rest of my undergrad education. He not only did that, he also paid for the first 60 hours of my graduate degree as well!

A Small Cloud

For three long years, there was a drought in Israel. There was no puddle jumping in Israel. Then the Lord promised Elijah that He would send rain, but like every promise, Elijah still had to circle it via persistent prayer. So, Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, fell on his face, and prayed for rain. Six times he told his servant to look toward the sea, but there was no sign of rain. And that is when most of us give up.

So why do we give up praying sometimes? We stop praying because we can't see any tangible difference with our natural eyes. We allow our circumstances to get between God and us instead of putting God between us and our circumstances.

Elijah held his holy ground. He stood on the promise God had given him. I think Elijah would have prayed ten thousand times if that is what it took, but between the sixth and seventh prayer, there was a subtle shift in atmospheric pressure. After the seventh circle, Elijah's nearsighted servant strained his eyes and saw a small cloud the size of a man's hand rising from the sea.

I can't help but ask the counterfactual question: what if Elijah had quit praying after the sixth circle? The obvious answer is that he would have forfeited the miracle. But Elijah prayed through and God came through. The sky turned black, heavy winds blew across the barren landscape, and raindrops fell for the first time in three years. And it wasn't a light drizzle. It was a terrific rainstorm.

It's so easy to give up on dreams, give up on miracles, and give up on promises. We lose heart, we lose patience, and we lose faith. And like a slow leak, it often happens without us even knowing it until our prayer life gets a flat.

Is there some dream that God wants to resurrect for you? Is there some promise you need to reclaim? Is there some miracle you need to start believing in again? The reason that many of us give up too soon is because we feel like we have failed if God doesn't answer our prayer. That isn't failure. The only way you can fail is if you stop praying.

For years I prayed for my wife's mom and dad to come to Christ. I never saw a movement towards Christ on their behalf. I'm ashamed to say it, but, I gave up. I quit. I stopped believing. Have you done this in an area of your life?

Throughout this journey of Draw the Circle, I have begun again. I am committed to praying daily for them to come to Christ and I promised God that I will share the story of Christ with the both of them again. Even after three years of drought, even after a severe bout with depression, Elijah believed that God could send rain even now. By the same token, I can't help but wonder if Elijah's persistence in prayer was hyperlinked to the miracle of raining quail?

After the Israelites left Egypt, they were in the desert and in need of food. So, God sent them a quail storm each evening. Basically, quail would cover the ground so that they could have sustenance. If God can send a quail storm, He can certainly send a thunderstorm.

One thing is certain: our most powerful prayers are hyperlinked to the promises of God. When you know you are praying the promises of God, you can pray with holy confidence. It's the difference between praying on thin ice and praying on solid ground. It's the difference between praying tentatively and praying tenaciously. You don't have to second-guess yourself because you know that God wants you to double-click on His promises.

There is an adage: God said it, I believe it, and that settles it. Here's a fresh take on that old truth: God said it, I've circled it, and that settles it. It was settled on the cross when Jesus said, "It is finished." It wasn't just the final installment on our sin debt. It was the down payment on all of His promises. No matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.

By the most conservative estimates, there are more than 3,000 promises in Scripture. By virtue of what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross, every one of them belongs to you. Every one of them has your name on it. The question is: how many of them have you circled?

Circling Promises

What I'm about to share has the power to revolutionize the way you pray and the way you read the Bible. We often view prayer and scripture reading as two distinct spiritual disciplines without much overlap, but what if they were meant to be hyperlinked? What if reading became a form of praying and praying became a form of reading? What promise do you need to circle?

It starts with changing the way you read the Bible. In fact, the Bible wasn't meant to be read through. The Bible was meant to be prayed through and then acted upon. Like we said earlier... pray like it depends on God and work like it depends on you.

If you pray through it, you'll never run out of promises to circle. The Bible is a promise book and a prayer book. And while reading is reactive, prayer is proactive. Reading is the way you get through the Bible. Prayer is the way you get the Bible through you. As you pray, the Holy Spirit will quicken certain promises to your spirit. It's very difficult to predict what and when and where and how, but over time, the promises

of God will become your promises. Then you need to circle those promises, both figuratively and literally.

At the end of 2006, I had made a decision to plant a church. I began to pray every single day in 2007, specifically for 100 people to come to Christ through the ministry that I would lead in 2008. I never missed a day. I would claim scriptures about God's desires to see people come into a relationship with Him. Why 100? I felt like God laid that number on my heart in prayer.

When the economy crashed in late 2007, the church planting organization that I belonged to cancelled all of the 2008 church plants. Through a series of events, I ended up on staff here at Crossroads. To be honest, I couldn't see how my prayer of 100 would be answered. I would be moving here on the last day of February, we would be reorganizing the youth ministry and we would be doing a public launch in the fall of 2008.

I continued to pray for the 100 to come to Christ. Once fall came, I kept praying to God for the 100, but would also point out that we are a bit behind in schedule. Then, something broke loose. Ten teens would come to Christ on this weekend and then 15 the next. I was getting calls from students who were leading their friends to Christ during the week. I had up to that point in my ministry years never seen anything like that. By the time we took our Christmas break, well over 100 teens had come to Christ. The youth group had grown in less than a year from an average of 30-40 attendees on Sunday nights to averaging over 200 teens coming weekly.

Elevate was off for a few weeks and I got to experience my first Christmas at Crossroads. I sat in the back at the end of each service as Pastor Steve would give people an opportunity to come into a relationship with Christ. I counted at the end of each service the number of people who raised their hand in response. Once the midnight service concluded, 97, 98, 99, and 100 and so on. I walked out into the parking lot that night and I looked to the heavens and said to God, "You have surprised me two times now. I am in awe of you!" I was reminded that even though I wanted people to come to Christ, God wanted it even more than I did.

So I ask you, "What prayers do you need to keep on praying through?"