



Praying Circles

Around Your
Marriage

Joel and Nina Schmidgall
with **Mark Batterson**

Praise for *Praying Circles around Your Marriage*

As they tell the story of their family's journey, Joel and Nina Schmidgall give an insider's view into the way they've drawn circles of prayer for their personal hopes and more. In the best times, those prayers have pushed them forward as a couple and as leaders. In the more difficult times, those prayers have been a backstop for a time of pause and reassessment. I've known them both for a very long time, and I know their commitment isn't limited to a prayer closet but compels them to the corridors of power and the streets of desperation. This book explains how.

Reggie and Debbie Joiner, founder and CEO of Orange

Michelle and I are so excited for *Praying Circles around Your Marriage*, and we can't wait for other couples to read this remarkable book. Pastor Joel and Nina Schmidgall have outlined how to create a joyful, prayerful fortress around your most important earthly relationship, keeping in and cultivating what is good and keeping out the things that harm. Their book will bless and inspire married couples, singles contemplating marriage, and pastors and leaders who work with couples. You don't want to miss this very special book!

Joshua and Michelle DuBois, executive director
of the White House Faith-based Initiative
under President Obama, CNN Commentator,
and CEO of Values Partnerships

Okay, true confession: I have a bias against marriage books because I think they make you feel guilty about yours. Good news: this is *not* that book. I am so glad Joel and Nina Schmidgall wrote this together. It's honest, real, challenging, practical, and vulnerable. It also points you to a surprising solution far too many people ignore—prayer. You'll love this book, and you'll love Joel and Nina.

Carey and Toni Nieuwhof, founding pastor of
Connexus Church and author of *Didn't See It Coming*

Your marriage will not only be strengthened, but you will experience great blessing if you practice daily prayer and Bible reading with your spouse.

Former Congressman Joseph R. Pitts, Pennsylvania

Joel and Nina Schmidgall have given us a profound gift—a handbook on prayer as the wellspring of biblical marriage. Engaged couples, newlyweds, and those, like us, who have passed the fifty-years-married mark need to read this book!

Dick and Ruth Foth, coauthors of *Known:
Finding Deep Friendships in a Shallow World*

Joel and Nina Schmidgall are two of our heroes in ministry and in marriage. Their commitment to their family and their calling is unmistakable, and they approach both with a sense of responsibility and a sense of humor. This book opens the curtain for the rest of us to learn how prayer is the bedrock of that commitment. We're excited to be able to read and apply these insights to our own marriage.

Geoff and Sherry Surratt, authors of *Together:
A Guide for Couples in Ministry*

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Praying Circles around Your Marriage

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*To our church family, National Community Church,
and the couples who have given us the privilege of pastoring you.
Thank you for inviting us into your most sacred moments.*

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Foreword

About halfway into a message that Joel and Nina Schmidgall shared about marriage at National Community Church, we knew they needed to write the book you hold in your hands. As we listened, we realized how much we have to learn from them. The irony is that we've been married a decade longer than Joel and Nina! And Joel is Lora's younger brother! But their marriage is mature beyond its years. And we believe that God has graced them and called them to share those hard-earned lessons with you.

As family, we've witnessed every milestone in their marriage. We've shared lots of laughs and tears. And we've also had the joy of serving together at National Community Church. Joel serves as executive pastor and is the longest-tenured member of our staff, besides the two of us. When Nina started leading our kids ministry, NCC had a dozen kids on a good Sunday, including our three children. She now leads a team that serves hundreds of kids and youth, plus their parents, across our seven campuses. All of that to say this: we've been through the thick and thin of life and ministry together.

When Mark wrote *The Circle Maker*, we had no idea it would impact the prayer lives of millions of readers. And all the credit

goes to God. He's the one who puts the right book in the right hands at the right time. That's the predominant prayer for every book Mark writes. And it's our prayer for this book as well. This book has the potential to change your marriage, even save your marriage. Well, not this book per se. More precisely, *prayer*!

Prayer is the difference between the best we can do and the best God can do. Prayer softens hearts, downloads wisdom, develops patience, exposes fear, challenges our thinking, and points us to the ultimate covenantal relationship with the One who loves us in the purest, most self-sacrificing way. When we grow in awareness of the Spirit who has been deposited in us, we find a deep well of resources to draw from. We would not be together twenty-six years later without submitting to the divine dance that must take place with a husband and wife and the Spirit of God. Love in true form is God, whether or not you realize it. But the voice of love can lose its volume over the years if we don't learn to tune back in.

Here's what we know for sure: Prayer is as important to marriage as anything you'll ever do. In *Praying Circles around Your Children*, Mark wrote, "You'll never be a perfect parent, but you can be a praying parent . . . Prayer turns ordinary parents into prophets who shape the destinies of their children."¹ What's true of parenting is true of marriage. You'll never be a perfect spouse, but you can be a praying spouse. There are moments in marriage when prayer is all you have left, but that doesn't mean it should be a last resort. If you prioritize prayer, it's preventative medicine.

Honestly, we wish we would've had this book when we got married. We did premarital counseling. We read some of the bestselling books at the time. But we got married so young that

we had a lot of maturing to do as individuals and as a couple. Our first two years were the toughest years of our marriage because we had some growing up to do! Mark will often say, “We’ve been happily married for twenty-four years.” After a pause, he’ll add the punch line, “And we just celebrated our twenty-sixth anniversary.” Do the math—our first two years were tough.

Part of the reason we like to share this is because not every marriage starts with a “honeymoon” phase. Don’t get us wrong, we had some amazing moments and memories. But our early years involved more work than we originally imagined. We weren’t as efficient as we could have been in the learning process because we tried to gut it out and figure it out by ourselves. We’re so thankful for the Lord’s grace on our marriage throughout the years and during some really tough seasons. If you’re in one of those seasons, there is hope on the other side!

There are lots of people who have been following Christ for twenty-five years, but they don’t have twenty-five years of experience. They have one year of experience repeated twenty-five times. Many marriages fall into the same trap. If we want our marriages to evolve, we’ve got to learn the lessons God is trying to teach us. We’ve had to learn a few lessons many times over! You don’t have to be afraid of making mistakes. That’s a given. But what we do with those mistakes, and whether we are willing to learn from them, will determine whether we grow closer or farther apart. Opening ourselves up to outside voices will sharpen the process, offer perspective, and set our course on a journey toward wholeness and oneness.

Like many couples, the two of us are very different from one another. Those differences can bring quite the adventure and

perhaps some fireworks too. But the differences that often cause tension can become blessings in disguise if a couple can learn to complement one another. Each of us, and our differences, reflect different dimensions of God's character.

You can be selfish and married, but you cannot be selfish and happily married. Marriage is one way that God interrupts our preoccupation with ourselves. As you and your spouse work through this book, focus on meeting the needs of your spouse. If you focus on getting your needs met, you'll be swimming upstream against the current. There are two keys to changing the current: humility and prayer. We have a little mantra we say all the time: "If you stay humble and stay hungry, there's nothing God cannot do in you and through you!" That certainly applies to marriage. If you walk in Christlike humility and have a desire for oneness, you will gain wisdom and experience instead of repeating the same patterns. Humility is the key to unity. And prayer is the key to humility. It's a recognition that you cannot do this in your own strength, your own wisdom. Nothing has the potential to change relational momentum like prayer!

One last word of encouragement. When people are pursuing a dream, Mark will often remind them that it will take longer and be much harder than they originally imagined. But the payoff is always greater too. Marriage falls into that category. It is a God-ordained, God-sized dream. And no one said it would be easy. You wouldn't chase a career dream without a plan and some training and some determination, would you? Going after your marriage with the same kind of intensity is one of the best investments you can make. It's also one of the greatest gifts you can give your children.

In the pages that follow, Joel and Nina introduce seven circles. We love each one of them. And we have a hunch that two or three of those circles will hit you right where you are in your marriage. But stay tuned. If you pick this book back up in five years, it may hit a different nerve ending.

You will greatly benefit from this book if you read it individually, but may we also encourage you to consider reading this book with your spouse? In fact, why not read it with other couples? There will be paragraphs you'll need to process internally, but processing verbally with others can help catalyze change. Marriage is too often treated as a solo sport. Trust us when we say it's a team sport. And no one models that better than Joel and Nina. You'll read lots of stories about lots of marriages in this book, and that's because Joel and Nina have befriended and counseled lots of other couples. You'll also notice that they've learned from those couples as well.

As you read *Praying Circles around Your Marriage*, take time to stop and reflect. If a certain paragraph hits a nerve ending, talk about it and pray about it. You may even want to write notes in the margins. Mark likes to quote an old proverb: "The shortest pencil is longer than the longest memory." He won't even pick up a book if he doesn't have a pen in hand. Take time to underline the sentences that impact you and to jot down thoughts that jump out at you. And whatever you do, please follow the prayer prompts and practice the action prompts!

Enjoy the journey of praying circles around your marriage.

Mark and Lora Batterson



Introduction

Circling Marriage

JOEL & NINA

*W*ith this ring, I thee wed.”

It was a hot and sticky afternoon in August. The air was thick with humidity and the faces of our family and friends were flushed pink with heat. August is a prime month for weddings in Washington, D.C., but it is certainly not because the weather is pleasant. The United States Congress takes recess for the month, and the entire city takes a big, deep breath. Hardworking staff all over the city are able to take a much-needed vacation, with the result that many couples plan their nuptials during this time—and we were no exception.

Joel and I (Nina) had been planning the day for months, but nothing could have prepared us for the moment the church doors opened and I began to walk down the aisle. Joel stood at the end of the aisle flanked by his brother, Robb, and his brother-in-law, who is also our pastor, Mark Batterson.

Mark officiated the ceremony. I remember feeling so comforted to have these moments led by someone who knew and loved us so well. He told stories about us and gently reminded us of the depth of the commitment we were about to make. Finally we arrived at the moment we had been most anticipating: “Joel and Nina, turn and face one another.”

Mark led us as we recited our vows to one another. The vows would be sealed with the exchange of rings. “This ring is a token of your undying love and your unending commitment to each other. Forsaking all others, do you promise to love and cherish Joel [to love and cherish Nina] as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” we said. And that was the day we stepped into the sacred circle of marriage.

A ring has been the symbol of a marriage covenant for generations. At its core, a ring is a circle. Because it has no beginning and no end, a circle represents the infinite. A circle represents the bold declaration of marriage. Exchanged during the wedding ceremony, the ring is an emblem of the sincerity and permanence of a couple’s love for one another and regard for their marriage. A wedding ring is made of precious metals, purified by the heat of many fires. The center of a circle represents a door leading to known and unknown events: “for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.” It is the symbol of destiny to pursue.

Circles are an ancient symbol of commitment without end, and to this day it remains deeply symbolic in a marriage ceremony. At traditional Jewish weddings there is a symbolic and intimate moment that is shared between bride and groom. As the bride proceeds down the aisle, she meets her groom under the *huppah* (“canopy”). Following her processional, the bride begins

to circle the groom. Traditionally, the bride circles seven times. In more modern times, the ceremony has been adapted, with each partner circling the other three times and then the couple circling one final time together. The act of *hakafot*, the Hebrew word for “circling,” is a deeply symbolic ritual. It represents compromise and unity within the sacred space of marriage. Seven is the number of completion and perfection in the Bible. This circling is a prayer and a declaration of partnership.

Prayer Revival

In *The Circle Maker*, Mark Batterson shared the legend from the Jewish Talmud of a man named Honi.¹ He was known as “the circle maker” because of his bold strategy of prayer. In a moment of deep need in the nation of Israel, he drew a circle around himself and publicly began to pray. His prayer was a declaration that he would not leave the circle until God blessed His people again. Honi’s prayer was considered one of the most significant prayers in the history of Israel, the prayer that saved a generation.

We need this same bold resolve within marriages today. Marriages are suffering. Many couples are experiencing high levels of hurt and disappointment in their marriage. Young marriages are desperate for hope and direction to make their commitment last. Many single men and women are taking a look at the crumbling marriages of their parents and peers and wondering if the ring is even worth it.

We know it is a foundation of prayer that offers the hope in marriage. It is through prayer that challenges will be overcome, hurts will be healed, and commitments reestablished.

Praying Circles around Your Marriage

It is time for a prayer revival in our marriages.

We don't know the story of your marriage. But we know that God can strengthen it through prayer.

Marriage is a journey unique to each couple. Each couple will endure different story lines, some with more heartbreaks than others. Each individual enters marriage with different hang-ups, some more easy to overcome than others. Every marriage has different ailments. But there is one shared antidote: prayer.

You make just a few key decisions in life. You spend the rest of your life managing those decisions. Outside of a faith decision, marriage is the most important decision you will ever make. The greatest relationship decision deserves the greatest investment.

Through prayer, God can give you new eyes for your spouse. Through prayer, God can rekindle romance. Through prayer, God can align vision, overcome pain and resentment, and reenergize your friendship.

The richness of your marriage will be determined by how frequently and how fervently God is invited into your relationship. Prayer will draw you into unity with God and, as a result, with one another.

Marriage is the union of two imperfect people. Through prayer, you invite the presence of a perfect God.

In our roles at National Community Church, we've had the opportunity to be invited into many important ceremonies in the lives of individuals. None is more sacred than the ceremony to join two individuals in marriage.

Marriage is God's most sacred covenant. It was ordained by God to provide believers with a picture of Christ's love and relationship to His church. Ephesians 5:32 calls marriage "a pro-

found mystery.” It is pointing to something bigger, revealing the day when we will become one with Christ. It is our great privilege to walk with couples as they step into this important relationship.

We see the real-life struggles of couples as they do the hard work of merging two lives. There is sometimes pain; often there’s misunderstanding. It always requires perseverance.

Not only have we been invited to come alongside couple to prepare for marriage and to officiate their wedding ceremony, but we have been invited into the sacred space of marriages when a couple faces hurdles or needs support. Couples graciously open their lives and allow us to walk with them and support them in prayer and counsel. It is some of the most important work we do.

Our own road to marriage was not an easy one. We are as different as two people can be. We come from different backgrounds and engage with the world from very different experiences. In fact, sometimes we marvel at the oddity of our partnership.

Opposites Attract

If you are familiar with various personality tests, you will understand just how different we are from each one another. We have the exact opposite Myers-Briggs personality makeup. All four letters. We do not share any of the same “strengths” on the Gallup Strengths Finder assessment. Nope, not one. We are different Enneagram numbers. We have reverse order of results on the spiritual gifts assessment. Yes, we are that different.

- When driving somewhere, Nina prefers directions to come in a step-by-step list. Joel never hits Start on the app for

- the map on his phone; he just looks at the overall picture of a map, zooming in to figure out the necessary turns.
- Nina is animated and assertive. Joel is relaxed and flexible.
 - Nina says a lot of words. Joel says less. Joel will tell people he is the headlines and Nina is the fine print.
 - Nina's love languages are acts of service and verbal affirmation. Joel's is . . . food.
 - When enjoying a meal, Nina prefers to share food and experience a meal together. Joel, very much, does not. Your food. My food. The end.
 - While sleeping, Nina likes three blankets on. Joel likes three fans on.

These differences are not limited to just our preferences. We think differently from one another. We navigate conflict differently. We have different response tendencies. We see the world through different lenses, do not make decisions in the same way, and are motivated by different things.

While this has potential to create a beautiful and powerful complement to one another, it also has potential for conflict and misunderstanding. It requires a lot of hard work and commitment to stay unified and connected. It takes prayers for insight and understanding.

As we walk together, let us share a little more about who we are. Our marriage is made up of two very flawed people. We are best friends, and our marriage is filled with love and laughter. (We got an extra dose of silly that we are trying desperately to pass along to our kids!) However, our marriage takes work every day, and it wasn't an easy road to fuse our very different lives.

Our Story

NINA

My desire for marriage and family was placed in my heart at a very young age, even before I knew the Lord. I didn't grow up in a home of faith and didn't come to understand Jesus as the hero in my story until middle school.

My parents were young loves who married very young, had me right away, and divorced while I was still a baby. I am from a blended family—one that had been blended and squished and stretched a number of times over.

Even in the midst of broken marriages around me, I had a desire for marriage and motherhood from as early as I can remember. Recently, I found a journal that was a student assignment in the third grade. In a poem called "Someday," I wrote a list of hopes and dreams for my future. There at the bottom, just under my plan to visit Japan, my eight-year-old self declared, "Someday I will be married, and a happy marriage [that's how I spelled it back then] that will be."

My journals throughout adolescence and into adulthood echoed my desire to have a healthy, strong, and lifelong marriage. When I met the Lord and came to understand how marriage was a picture of His relationship to His church, it gave a greater understanding to my longings.

Like many kids from blended or broken homes, I was left trapped between desperate longings for marriage and terrible fears about it as well. I carried a lot of reservations about my ability to find success in lifelong marriage.

As I grew into adulthood and began to experience some

bumps and hiccups in my own dating life, I had to confront some deep fears about whether I even knew how to have a healthy relationship or had any of the tools to have the marriage I desired. Most of my fears were rooted in my own concerns about my inadequacies, and every failure I had in relationships validated those concerns.

I met Joel my very first night in Washington, D.C. I had just moved to town, and a friend invited me to dinner at the house where Joel also lived. He was tall, confident, and so funny, and I was smitten as soon as I met him. I resolved to keep showing up in his path, visiting the church where he worked and going to events I hoped he was attending. It was a year before Joel asked me out on our first date.

Our relationship grew slowly. While it's true that opposites attract, we had a lot of work to do to come to an understanding of one another and to make our backgrounds and personalities come into alignment. Of course, dating years kick up all the issues you don't necessarily realize are at work in the subnarrative of your life.

I wondered whether I could trust someone to commit to me, despite my flaws and weaknesses. Joel seemed very alarmed about any conflict we might encounter, and it made him hesitant to enter into marriage. His hesitations only fueled my self-doubt.

I struggled with how much time and work it took to come to a place where we could consider marriage. At the time, I couldn't see the healing process the Lord was doing in me through our relationship.

So many young people are looking for marriage to be the answer to wounds or gaps in their lives. Marriage doesn't complete

you, but, in fact, it exposes you. It exposes sin and weakness and can open the door for either healing or further damage.

While I didn't see it at the time, the Lord knew exactly what I needed in order to have the marriage I had hoped and prayed for. He had plans to use it as a refining tool to shape and grow me.

The Lord knew I needed someone unwavering. Joel is deliberative and hesitant when it comes to decisions. But he is resolute and unwavering in every commitment he makes. For someone who grew up with fears about instability, Joel has provided stability.

The things that are difficult in the dating years are usually there to stay. But through growth and persistent prayer, they can be the very things that aid in overcoming. Imperfect but just right, our story is one for which I am so grateful.

JOEL

Growing up, I had a genuine appreciation for my parents' marriage. They were a team, seemed to never fight, and loved us kids. I thought marriage should be effortless. I realize now that was a naive idea. But I also later realized I had developed unrealistic and unhealthy expectations. As I understood it, to argue meant incompatibility. If you had to work through issues, it meant you *had* issues. I thought a relationship shouldn't have any. I came to realize that my parents had done such a good job of sheltering us from their challenges, fights, and incompatibilities that I didn't know how to work through those things myself.

My dad was an influential man who held things close to the

vest. My mom is a sweet and kind woman who goes with the flow. What appeared to be compatibility and agreement actually had layers of conversations and prayer when the children weren't around. As kids, we saw the output, not the input. I had a lot to learn. I thought perfection was the only option, but I fell far short of it. And I held high expectations for any future partner.

In the beginning of my young adult years, I entered a dating relationship that grew serious. I had found someone who knew me like no one else, and someone I thought I knew more than anyone else. My parents shared with me some concerns about the relationship, but I wouldn't hear it. After four years, the relationship came to a sudden and devastating end. Learning the extent of the deception, I found myself in shock. Honestly, it messed me up. The devastating end to that relationship was magnified when I lost my dad suddenly to a heart attack soon after. It was the darkest season of my life. My brain was a fog; my heart had trouble finding hope; and I developed skepticism toward marriage. As I often do, I pushed all of those feelings underneath the surface.

But a truly authentic and connected relationship doesn't allow you to live on the surface. If I were ever to marry, I had to learn how to let someone else in. Through prayer, I asked God to do a healing work in me and allow me to build trust again.

I had already been living and working in Washington, D.C., for a few years before I met Nina. She was invited to dinner in the house where I lived with a bunch of guys. Goodness gracious! She was out of my league. She was gorgeous, smart, fun—a young up-and-comer on Capitol Hill. I was immediately attracted to her and her magnetic personality.

What I didn't realize was that Nina would be the one to draw out all the good, the bad, and the hidden in me. I had been in enjoyable relationships, but Nina really made me a better person. Sometimes it was through inspiration and sometimes through confrontation. Revelations came through Nina, and I was forced to draw them out through prayer. As I committed to be vulnerable and open with Nina, God was faithful to do a work in me that I couldn't do myself.

The Marriage Commitment

We both love attending weddings, but Nina *really* loves them. Well, Nina loves any party-like atmosphere but weddings include so many of Nina's favorite things—like family and friends and dancing and romance and eternal declarations of love . . . and, of course, good food! Lately, many bride and grooms are getting cute with their wedding vows. Like, "I commit to watching movies other than romantic comedies. And I promise always to root for the Chicago Cubs!" Well, that is what Joel would have asked to include if we had gotten cute with our vows. Except Joel would have also added a commitment to nightly foot rubs and going out to eat Ethiopian food regularly.

The delivery of the vows is usually an epic moment, a profession of love and admiration. But the truth is that a *vow* made before God and community is so much more than a declaration of *present* love; it's a mutually binding promise of *future* love.

A marriage vow is not a one-time commitment and it's covered for life. It is an everyday commitment. It is a commitment to daily lay down one's own needs and desires.

The Bible offers us a picture of marriage as a reflection of Christ's relationship with His church. But we live in a culture where the presentation of marriage has been grossly distorted. Our culture convinces us that marriage is something *for* me rather than something asked *of* me.

The love required in marriage is the love that calls us to submit to one another, to love like Christ loved the church. The entire New Testament clarifies that the kind of love Jesus showed is a sacrificial love. Philippians 2 describes Christ as emptying Himself and taking on the form of a servant.

Conversations with people who want to be married sometimes reveal that they are often more focused on what they'll get rather than what they'll be required to give.

Marriage does have many incredible blessings. Both of us would confess that our marriage is *the* greatest gift the Lord has given each of us. But let us be very clear that it is hard! To keep it healthy and strong, it is also the single biggest commitment the Lord has ever asked of us.

The call to deny oneself on behalf of another is the highest sacrifice either of us have been asked to make.

When the Bible speaks of love, it is measured not in how much you want to receive but in how much you are willing to give of yourself.

On our wedding day, before he led us to recite our vows, Mark's message reminded us that in marriage, we have to "yield the right of way" to one another day after day. That's the way he described the mutual submission into which we were stepping.

When you dreamed of marriage, what were you imagining? Is that the way you are living today?

Prayer Partnership: Mark and Lora Batterson

The story of the circle maker has changed millions of lives since Mark wrote it. We don't take lightly the honor it is to be asked by Mark and Lora to write this book. We are grateful to be entrusted with inviting the miraculous work of prayer into the sacred covenant of marriage.

We've had the great privilege of serving alongside Mark and Lora at National Community Church since its earliest days. Together in ministry, we have walked through victories and heartaches, shared countless laughs and memories, and endured innumerable stresses. They have invited us into a beautiful partnership in ministry and also opened their lives to us. Just ahead of us in marriage, ministry, and parenting, they have been our biggest cheerleaders and the greatest investors in our family.

There isn't much we can share about marriage that doesn't have their fingerprints of influence. Mark and Lora have never held anything back from us, sharing transparently about the struggles and joys in marriage. It is from their marriage that we've learned how to show appreciation and support for one another. They have shown us an example of commitment to family above everything else. By modeling deep and sacrificial generosity, Mark and Lora have taught us what it looks like to build a marriage that can be used powerfully for the kingdom.

Above all, Mark and Lora have modeled a marriage built on a deep and consistent prayer life. They circle each other, their children, their family, their church. They pray bold and consistent prayers.

Lora and Joel, brother and sister, were raised in a legacy of prayer. The dedication in *The Circle Maker* is written to Mark's father-in-law, Joel and Lora's dad: "To my father-in-law, Bob Schmidgall. The memory of you kneeling in prayer lives forever, as do your prayers."²

It is this legacy of prayer on which both the Batterson and Schmidgall marriages stand. Through prayer, the Lord is invited to take the lead in our lives every day.

Evaluated Experience: The Toyota Way

Much has been written about the Toyota Production System (TPS) known for reforming the automotive manufacturing industry. "The Toyota Way" is a commitment to ensuring high quality at the lowest cost while minimizing waste.

After World War II, the Japanese economy was absolutely devastated, and a textile-company-turned-automobile-manufacturer was on the brink of bankruptcy. Its debt was eight times its capital value. More than seventy years later, Toyota is valued at thirty trillion yen. So, what in the world happened? The short answer is kaizen. Kaizen is a manufacturing process that focuses on small incremental adjustments to ensure continuous improvement.

Eiji Toyoda was a Japanese industrialist and one of the founders of the Toyota Motor Corporation. In 1950, Toyoda took a team of engineers on a twelve-week study tour of automobile plants in the United States. The Toyota Corporation was producing about nine hundred vehicles per month, one-tenth of what Ford was producing. They expected to be amazed, but it was quite the opposite. They were surprised by the inefficiencies in

American assembly lines. They actually saw an opportunity to catch up, and they have. In 2017, Toyota had a 15 percent market share, second only to General Motors. They now compete neck and neck with Ford.

Toyota's success rests on those small, continuous improvements. In fact, Toyota invests a million dollars every hour in research and development. Maybe that's why 80 percent of Toyotas purchased twenty years ago are still on the road today! That's a remarkable shelf life. It traces back to a reconnaissance trip in 1950, coupled with kaizen. It's the Toyota Way.

What if men and women took a similar "study tour" of their marriage? Can you imagine what we might learn about each other—what works well and what doesn't, our strong points as well as our shortcomings? Sadly, many couples don't really take an evaluated look at their marriage. All too often, couples put their most precious relationship on automatic pilot and wonder why it suffers. There are a few lessons we can learn from Toyota.

The Toyota Way starts with new employees standing in a circle drawn in chalk on the factory floor. Their first task? To stand in the circle and observe everything that's happening. The new employee is told to observe and take note of what they see. That's no easy job because there are lots of moving pieces to the process of building a car. Similarly, marriage also has lots of moving pieces. There's much to observe and note.

In this book, we will encourage you on a journey to improve your marriage. As we begin, we invite you to step into the marriage circle. Look long and hard.

The Toyota executives understand that the key to growth isn't experience; it's *evaluated* experience.

Prayer is the best evaluator. Honest conversation with God about your marriage will give you the greatest insight for innovation, conviction, and hope. As you read this book, we hope you will get in the circle and take a look around.

We want to encourage you to begin to build a legacy of prayer within your own marriage. In the seven chapters that follow, we'll invite you to circle different areas of your marriage. Note that each of us has written alternating chapters. To make it clear, we've noted at the beginning of the chapter which one of us is writing.

- **Vision Circle** (Joel): How to combine two unique visions for a new and combined purpose together.
- **War Circle** (Nina): How to understand the roots of conflict and see it as an opportunity for growth and greater connection.
- **Romance Circle** (Joel): How to avoid the transactional and cultivate a connected and intimate relationship.
- **Dance Circle** (Joel): How to merge interests, personalities, and histories as a partnership, fluid in movement and motion. How to posture to serve your spouse and position him/her to be used greatly.
- **Support Circle** (Nina): How to surround your marriage with a healthy support community that will offer encouragement, inspiration, perspective, support, and accountability.
- **Storm Circle** (Nina): How to build a foundation for your marriage that will help you weather the trials that are sure to come.
- **Legacy Circle** (Joel): How to leverage your marriage to have influence for generations.

We hope you will read this book with your spouse. Your investment can start as you read together. Throughout the book, we have included places that prompt you to prayer and to action. We encourage you to seriously consider the prompts and pause to pray as you read. Consider stopping to journal your prayers or take note of things the Lord speaks to you.

You can overcome the distance in your marriage through prayer.

The dreams you hope to realize in your family can be achieved through prayer.

The challenges facing your family can be overcome through prayer.

What your marriage will become is determined by how you pray. Prayers for your marriage will allow you to claim God-given promises, fulfill God-given dreams for your family, and seize a God-ordained legacy for generations.

You can have a peace-filled home. You can have companionship. You can achieve dreams. You can have understanding, unity, joy.

Prayer is the secret weapon.

Let's start circling.



Chapter 1

Vision Circle

JOEL

*O*K Houston, we've had a problem here."¹

On April 13, 1970, at 9:09 p.m., disaster struck when the spacecraft *Odyssey* carrying the Apollo 13 crew was shaken by an onboard explosion. The Apollo 13 mission was intended to be the third manned lunar landing. Astronauts Jim Lovell, Jack Swigert, and Fred Haise had left earth two days before, en route to the moon.

A routine maintenance check of the systems resulted in an explosion of one of the spacecraft's oxygen tanks. Suddenly, the lives of the astronauts were at risk. The command module's normal supply of electricity, light, oxygen, and water was lost. There was just one small problem. They were 200,000 miles from earth.

Over the coming hours, the crew scrambled to come up with emergency procedures to return the astronauts safely home.

Praying Circles Around Your Marriage

By Joel and Nina Schmidgall with Mark Batterson

Dream big, pray hard, and think long—together.

It's time to learn the relational truths in the legend of Honi the Circle Maker—a man bold enough to draw a circle in the sand and not leave it until God answered his impossible prayer. The commitment made in the sacred circle of marriage requires the same kind of boldness and resolve as the Circle Maker. Honi's prayer saved a generation, and your prayers can transform your relationship.

Praying Circles around Your Marriage draws from the life-changing principles Mark Batterson outlines in his *New York Times* bestseller *The Circle Maker*. Joined by Pastor Joel and Nina Schmidgall who serve with Mark at National Community Church, the authors draw from personal stories, Scripture, and practical insight.

What your marriage will become is determined by how you pray. Bold prayers honor God. God honors bold prayers. *Praying Circles around Your Marriage* will empower you and your spouse to identify your greatest dreams for the most important relationship in your life, and pray the kind of audacious prayers in which God finds delight.

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