



# 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*

Praying  
Circles  
Around Your  
*Marriage*

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# Praying Circles

Around Your  
*Marriage*

Joel and Nina Schmidgall  
with Mark Batterson

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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."<sup>1</sup> 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

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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 couples 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 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

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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

## Praying Circles around Your Marriage

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 deliberate 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.



## Praying Circles around Your Marriage

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."<sup>2</sup>

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.

## Praying Circles around Your Marriage

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.

## Circling Marriage

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."<sup>1</sup>

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

The astronauts and NASA's Mission Control Center were faced with enormous logistical problems in stabilizing the spacecraft and its air supply and ensuring successful reentry into earth's atmosphere.

Navigation was another problem, and Apollo 13's course had to be repeatedly corrected. Without power to the ship's computers, all navigation and targeting functions were unavailable. The explosion had created a cloud of debris around the spacecraft that inhibited visibility. The crew couldn't discern the stars from the particles glimmering in the light from the sun.

Without vision, the crew could not successfully navigate the incredible challenges facing them. Without the ability to use the stars to orient themselves, the astronauts could not set themselves on a course to safety.

Marriage starts out with grand vision—a shared way of seeing what you hope your future together will be. It is exciting and full of possibilities. But for many, marriage becomes filled with problems we never anticipated and for which we do not have the tools to navigate. Unanticipated problems throw us off course, and we don't know how to reorient. Some couples lose sight of their destination, while others never had a clear vision in the first place.

What is the vision for your marriage? Have you ever paused to figure out the direction your marriage is headed? If not, how will you reorient if you get thrown off course? When disaster strikes and you lose visibility, how will you reorient to redirect the ship?

At the height of racial tensions in the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. prophetically wrote from prison of the church's problem and responsibility in the division of people. He called the church to not just be a taillight, shining a light on what went wrong, but to be a headlight, shining a light on what could be.



Most of us can give a detailed explanation of the problems in our marriage. We can tell you every selfish, frustrating, and just plain annoying thing the other person does. But it is not the ability to identify problems that will lead to wholeness; it is our commitment to shine a light on what could be that will bring solutions.

If you're like most couples, it's all too easy to let the throes of everyday life take priority away from cultivating a larger purpose that will unify you even in the most turbulent times.

Through almost twenty years of pastoral work at a church made up primarily of individuals in their twenties and thirties, we've been able to counsel numerous couples. Many of them struggle with aligning individual visions that compete with one another. They can find themselves in a tug-of-war in pursuit of personal calling.

We see this magnified in Washington, D.C. Talented and passionate young people move to this city to pursue long-held dreams. Many find equally gifted partners and decide to marry. They quickly find it isn't easy to merge two passionate and competing visions, and they begin to pull against one another. If either spouse has had to give up more than the other, resentment can build and unity can begin to dissolve.

A couple very close to us had to work through something like this. Dave and Kate are two of the most gifted individuals you'll ever meet. Both of them are smart, passionate, and entrepreneurial. They are compassionate and thoughtful, and both are well read and incredibly articulate.

When Kate was just a teenager, God gave her a vision for telling the stories of the work He was doing around the world.

## Praying Circles around Your Marriage

Listening to a missionary who had flown home to share about their work to their church, Kate shares, “I felt such an injustice that this missionary had come so far to give such a subpar presentation of what was clearly powerful, wonderful work that God was doing. I had this conviction that there had to be a better way to tell the story of what God is doing in the world.”

As soon as Dave and Kate were married, they moved to Scotland to support a church plant while Dave got his master’s degree in peacebuilding. At the end of the term, they returned to the United States, and Dave successfully pursued a number of different things like pastoring and filmmaking, but he couldn’t get clarity on God’s specific direction.

When Dave and Kate returned home to the United States, Kate decided to launch the dream that God had put on her heart at such a young age. On her twenty-sixth birthday, she walked into an office in downtown D.C. to register her new company, Bittersweet Creative.<sup>2</sup> Bittersweet would be a creative company that would produce a magazine to tell the stories of organizations that do inspiring work all around the world in response to the critical social issues of our day. Bittersweet would use print and film to tell the stories of hope and inspiration.

As Kate’s passion began to become a reality, Dave wrestled for clarity for his purpose. He shares in retrospect that it was deeply unsettling to feel a prompt for larger things but not to get clarity on exactly what that might be. Kate’s developing success began to affect Dave’s level of security and made it difficult for him to support her well. They went through a season that felt more like a competition, and it began to put pressure on their marriage.

Since their earliest days of dating, both Dave and Kate had

a sense that their relationship was about something bigger than both of them. They knew their relationship was supposed to be outwardly focused on others, but the individual pursuit, pride, and jealousy were pulling them apart.

What we have found with many couples we counsel who start to feel this tension is that they can do the hard work of gaining consensus about merging their lives—and then circumstances change and the scales tip. Each time a season changes, a couple can find themselves having to renegotiate the terms. New challenges emerge that put new pressure on the relationship. An educational or vocational opportunity presents itself to one partner. The couple unexpectedly encounters a family or health crisis. A couple decides to relocate and must navigate new relationships and environments. In the midst of all of these changes, if the couple is not careful, the relationship can be reduced to a scoreboard or a scale that measures who is bending the most.

As vocations change, as kids enter the picture, as life changes course in a variety of ways, a shared vision can help a couple stay centered on what matters most. Without vision, we're left to survival mode. But with vision, we walk in purpose.

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**PRAYER PROMPT:** Maybe you find yourself in one of these seasons right now. Maybe you feel like the terms of your relationship have changed and you're having to give more than what feels fair. Ask God to remind you of a larger purpose for your marriage. Ask Him to reveal how He plans to use you.

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## Schmidgall Core Values

Early on in our marriage, we seemed to have repetitive and recycled conflict. We were two active individuals trying to merge our lives. Nina would often work until very late at night, staying to help members of Congress through late-night votes. I was in the early years of helping lead an upstart growing church. Our small staff meant we were all involved day or night, weekday or weekend.

We were each trying to pursue our personal goals and trying to find time to forge this new priority of marriage. This meant a lot of unmet expectations. In the newer days of a relationship, it can feel like every conflict waged is somehow establishing boundaries that will play out for the rest of your marriage. You don't want to give up territory you may never get back. Marriage feels a little bit like *Risk*, the board game of global domination. "I can't surrender South America to you. I'll never get it back!" In our case, we tended to focus on what each one of us was giving up instead of focusing on what we were forging together. To do so is a recipe for a lot of arguments!

We needed a vision. A *vision*, a shared way of seeing, begets a clarifying *purpose*, a shared way of doing, that helps us navigate decisions. We had to step out of our individualistic approach and grip a vision from God for us. We had to die to self and stop trying to establish our own ways.

I thought mature love would be achieved when we stopped arguing so much. But what I've realized is that mature love is more about the pursuit of purpose. We will never have an argument-less marriage. But I do know that when we're focused

on a sense of *calling*, the arguments lose steam and intensity and seem to become inconsequential. A healthy, connected marriage is not about the absence of conflict as much as about the presence of purpose.

How did we arrive at a place of shared vision?

In those hard years at the beginning of marriage, Nina and I really wrestled in prayer over what we wanted to be about and how we wanted to organize our lives. It turned out that those conflicts about how to spend our time were not in vain. As we did the hard work to hash out our different priorities, shared commitments started to rise to the surface. Over the years, we began to ask ourselves hard questions.

- What sort of impact do we want to make on our community?
- What do we care about that we can both rally around?
- What set of gifts are unique to us as a couple?
- Where do we work best together?

Through diligent prayer, especially when we did not feel like we were on the same page, God began to reveal some things. We mined our histories and evaluated where our relationship brought life to us and to others. We asked God for discernment about how to be obedient to Jesus' words and how to honor the way He had created each of us. Certain themes began to show themselves. Finally we wrote them into a list of core values: **service, adventure, generosity, courage, and honor**. We wanted these words to direct us, to motivate us, to remind us of our priorities.

As we started to identify our values, a unified vision started

to become clearer. We wrapped these values into a simple mantra that is found in Acts 20:35. We want to *give more than we receive*. The *vision* birthed from those *values* helped us walk in *purpose*.

### **Values → Vision → Purpose**

In other words, we start with what's important to us—our values. These values shape what we hope for in the future—our vision. And finally, this shared way of seeing turns into a shared way of living—our purpose.

The simple mantra was a statement that gave us direction as a couple. Early in our marriage, it meant we used our house to host others, even if it was inconvenient. We had guests so often that we called our home “Hotel Schmidgall.” It meant making sacrifices in our budget so we could give regularly to missions or make a gift to the DC Dream Center, a mentoring project we support.<sup>3</sup> Over the years it has meant making the time to go to the performance or sporting event of a young person in our life or putting aside work emails at night to drop off hot chocolate and snacks to the friends experiencing homelessness in our neighborhood. We found ourselves saying a more unified yes to opportunities that fit with a vision that God had birthed in us together. It has meant remaining committed to meeting needs in ways that don't necessarily benefit us.

We have come back to this simple statement of vision thousands of times. We whisper it to each other in decision moments. We encourage each other with it in times of discouragement. We have found that it doesn't just give us a path to dream about our calling; it also gives perspective to our problems and purpose to our pain.

Vision will do that. It leads you in purposeful living. It gives you resolve when you are tired. It gives you determination in the difficult. Amazingly, it can bring retroactive joy to the pain of the past. Why do you think we sing songs in church about the cross? The cross was an instrument of torture and pain. It was an act of brutality. Yet we sing about the wonderful cross with such joy. Why? It is because of the incredible purpose that came out of that pain—a purpose so deep that it not only gives us joy today but allows us to reach back and celebrate those moments of deep pain for Christ. A vision is a gift that will absolutely change your past perspective and reorder your future conversations and actions.

When marriage gets tough, many couples want to bow out. Sometimes couples will call for the lifeboat before the vision has even been revealed. It is through the hardest moments that revelation often comes. This is where the commitment sustains.

## Vision Begins with Covenant

The birth of vision begins in the deepest level of commitment—a covenant. The Hebrew word for “covenant” is the word *berith*. It’s used 280 times in the Old Testament and is derived from a root that means “to cut.” It’s a reference to ancient covenant making, where an animal was divided into two parts, and the covenanting parties passed between the two parts. They were essentially saying, “If we don’t abide by this covenant, may we end up like the animal that was cut in two.” But whether a business relationship, a marriage relationship, or any covenant relationship during that time, there were consequences for breaking covenant.

What if that had been a part of your marriage ceremony?

Cue “Canon in D.” The doors swing open for father and daughter in white wedding gown. The audience stands and smiles and begins to take photos of this beautiful bride . . . walking between a sliced heifer. Hello!

It is interesting to note that the tradition of family and friends of the bride and groom sitting on the opposite side of the aisle from each other was to symbolize this cutting of the covenant. The white runner down the center aisle is placed as holy ground for the bride and groom to meet in the middle, representing their covenant commitment. So, the meaning is not completely lost in our tradition.

But historically, for the covenant to come to life, there had to be a death. To grasp a vision from God for our marriage, it doesn’t start by asking what I want out of marriage. Getting a vision for your marriage starts by dying to self and surrendering to God. Marriage is God’s assault and attack on my selfishness and His rebirth in me of selflessness. That doesn’t happen in a moment, but in every moment of marriage.

Though a couple stands in front of the officiant to give their vows, the covenant they are making is not made to the person officiating the wedding or even to the guests. It is a covenant made to God. In the same way, a vision for a marriage will come only from God—not from any other source.

Through prayer, God will reveal His vision for your marriage. Begin by surrendering your marriage to God. Let go of your pride, your wants, your personal pursuits. Ask God in prayer to make His wants and vision your wants and vision. Seek to find out who God has made you to be as a couple and why He has brought you together.



**ACTION PROMPT:** Stop here and begin to surrender your marriage to God. Ask God to help you let go of your personal agenda and to reveal why He has brought you and your spouse together. Can you reduce it to a sentence or a list of values?

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## Unique Imprint

Fingerprints are one of those physical attributes that help us understand that each person is created entirely unique. The tiny ridges, whorls, and valley patterns on a person's finger are entirely unique to that person. In fact, no two fingerprints have ever been found alike in billions of comparisons.

Just as each of us has a unique fingerprint, each of us also has a persona that is entirely individual and unduplicated. Made up of our differing personalities and perspectives, intertwined with our different life experiences and circumstances, this means every person is entirely unique and will have a unique imprint on the world.

Mark Batterson calls this a person's "soulprint," and in his book by the same name, he writes, "There has never been and never will be anyone else like you. But that isn't a testament to you. It's a testament to the God who created you."<sup>4</sup>

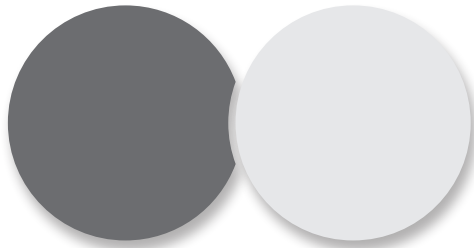
Before a couple gets married, they exist as two separate individuals. Each individual has a unique history, gift set, interests, and vision for their future. And when two people come together in marriage, you create a unique marriage print.

## Praying Circles around Your Marriage

Your marriage has an identity that cannot be replicated by any other couple. Together you and your spouse can impact others in a way no other couple can. Let's look at the ways these circles come together, which illustrate different approaches to marriage.

### Attachment

In this approach to marriage, we find a spouse to do life alongside. Often when a person thinks about marriage, they are considering whose circle they might want to attach their circle to. In this situation, a spouse doesn't take away from who you are, but they are going to come alongside you, supporting your vision and pursuing their own vision as well. It's a mutually beneficial marriage. The common vision is individuals who care for and support the other.



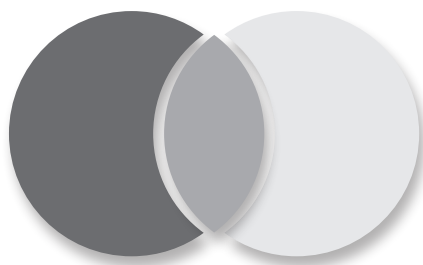
In his assessment of marriage and community in Jewish tradition, Rabbi Maurice Lamm points to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's description of how Jewish philosopher Maimonides distinguished the different approaches to friendship within marriage. The attachment approach is called *haver le'davar*.<sup>5</sup> It is a utilitarian association that depends on whether or not each

person is useful to the other. When the usefulness disappears, “the bond of love disappears.”<sup>6</sup>

Too often a person will attach their individual circle to another but refrain from making any real sacrifices of their personal goals or agenda. This loose sort of attachment makes it very easy to break the two circles apart again should the relationship no longer be beneficial to either party.

### **Alignment**

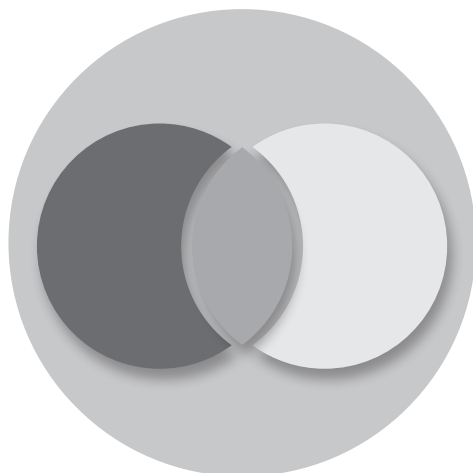
In this picture of marriage, one person comes together with another, and they intentionally try to merge parts of their lives. The Jewish term *haver le'daagah* speaks of having a person with whom one can share troubles, sorrows, and joys, which will lighten the load for each. As Rabbi Lamm writes, “Joys are multiplied and sorrows are divided when they are shared.”<sup>7</sup>



In this approach, each person maintains his or her own dreams, ideas, and work. But they have combined ideas and relationships. In its ideal, this approach protects individualism while also being intentional about combining life in certain areas. The common vision is found in whatever areas the couple shares in common.

## Marriage Print

In this approach to marriage, we find a picture of oneness. Each individual will always maintain the uniqueness of who God has made them to be individually—their history, personality, and image. But every part of the person has an influence on the larger vision of the couple as a whole.



When you draw the circle around the entirety of who you are together in marriage, you are still one, but God expands and multiplies your vision. This approach releases the focus on self. It paints a picture that marriage requires all of you but produces more than the both of you. Recognizing the larger circle as a vision granted from the Lord, this approach focuses less on individual benefit and more on kingdom purpose.

For this approach, the Jewish term *haver le'deah* applies—“a joint dedication to common goals.” It is a “dream of realizing great ideals, with a readiness to sacrifice to achieve for their attainment.”<sup>8</sup>

This is what we refer to as your marriage print. It is the joint dedication to a greater vision—a vision that is realized through your marriage in a greater way than it could be realized individually. By identifying your unique marriage print and determining how to lean in and maximize it, you can leverage your marriage for meaning and impact.

The couple we mentioned before, Dave and Kate, who were feeling divided in their individual pursuits, now have one of the most beautiful examples of a marriage print. While each of their individual careers had really started to take off, Dave and Kate felt like they were pulling against one another rather than sharing a unified vision. Uncomfortable with the way their pursuits were distancing them from each other, they began to pray that God would align their visions.

A number of years into their marriage, Dave began a forty-day prayer challenge with a group of guys. The Lord began to do such a powerful work in each of the men that they decided to extend it to a full year. Prompted by the promises in 2 Chronicles 7:14, they prayed together every morning at 7:14 a.m. Dave considers the revelations through prayer that year to be the turning point for revealing a vision for their marriage.

Dave explains, “Something deepened in my heart for Kate during that year of prayer. I started to increase my prayers, and it began to deepen my own convictions. God began to dethrone our own ambitions so we could genuinely honor what God has put in each other.” They committed to embrace and champion each other’s pursuits. They began to claim each other’s victories as their own.

God began to reveal a shared vision. Through prayer, they

asked God for clarity about the “culture” of their marriage. He gave them His word in Isaiah 58:12—that they would be “Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.” This led them to focus on people and places of conflict. As a couple, they jointly committed to seek the kingdom here on earth now.

Just as that important year of prayer was coming to a close, God gave them an opportunity to buy a sizable home in D.C. that would become a hub for the work they do together. It is a place of reconciliation where people of all backgrounds and positions can be brought together. They house refugees, feed and entertain marginalized neighborhood youth, and host opportunities for learning and connection.

Kate continues to lead Bittersweet, telling the story of hope and inspiration amid poverty, corruption, disease, devastation, and abuse. Dave serves as a pastor, doing peacemaking work in the diverse communities of Washington, D.C. Dave says, “It’s been an evolution of two very different visions that have remained unique but are now somehow beautifully working together. While we are still two unique seeds, we finally feel planted in the same soil.”

The couples we see with the deepest connection and greatest unity are the ones who, like Dave and Kate, have sought the Lord for a revelation of shared vision.

## Shared Vision: The Antidote to a Thousand Arguments

The reason that businesses create policies and procedures is to be able to make a thousand decisions at one time. Otherwise, they have to make a decision about each new circumstance,

each new day. In many ways, clarifying vision is doing the same thing in your relationship. There is power in predecision to guide priorities.

The word *division* is made up of two parts. The prefix *di* means “two.” So the word *division* means “two visions.” The reason so many marriages live in constant conflict is that there are two visions in the home.

Do you have a vision in your marriage or do you have di-vision?

Luke 11:17 tells us, “Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall.”

Most couples have not consciously thought about this, but there’s great hope for your future if you can start here and now. If you continue to coexist with two visions, your house will reap what you sow. But when you buy in to a shared vision, it is like predeciding a thousand decisions before they are ever made.

One way this plays out for Nina and me is in the way we manage our finances. We have already predecided to do our best to live a life of service and sacrifice. We seek to give more than we receive. While this includes our time, it also has financial implications. This means we don’t have to have a conversation every month about whether we will tithe or give to missions organizations. We have already made those predecisions before any money hits our bank account. This helps us avoid the tendency to overspend or just serve ourselves. When we take a look at our calendar for the month, we are able to avoid many disagreements when we let our values guide our decisions. We have guidelines in place that help us ensure that our priorities are driving our commitments.

## **Vision Directs**

In an age in which we use our electronic devices to direct us, it is hard to remember the long, painstaking path that navigators took to help people find their way. Historically, navigation has included dependence on constant objects of the physical world—the sun, the moon, the stars—and using them to find one’s way in the world. For thousands of years, navigators, sailors, and astronomers used the North Star, also known as Polaris, as their true north, relying on it to give them a sense of direction. The North Star lies nearly in a direct line with the axis of the earth’s rotation, making it appear motionless in the sky. This makes it an excellent fixed point to use for navigation.

Vision gives us a sense of our true north. It won’t mean that every decision will be based on a predetermined standard. It just serves as a marker to direct or redirect our path and ensure we’re staying true to our desired course.

In our case, our shared vision helps push those 55/45 decisions in a certain direction. It holds us accountable to make sure that as a whole, we’re always finding ways to allow our marriage to bless outwardly. We don’t use shared vision to force our way. Shared vision is not a rule to follow; it’s a North Star that guides.

## **Vision Source**

You may have a strong sense that there is a purpose for your marriage, but it hasn’t been revealed to you yet. Just like the mountains hidden in the night, you know God’s vision is there, but you just can’t see it yet. You want to know how to get a clear revelation of that vision.

I have a strong memory of the first time my family took a



vacation outside of the Chicago area. We arrived in Colorado late at night and drove to our little cabin in a small town called Frisco, near the mountains. It was dark when we arrived. The air was fresh, and the mood was calm. I had been told of the beauty of the region, but because it was dark, I wasn't able to see it for myself. We went to bed, but when I got up the next morning and walked outside, my jaw dropped. The Rocky Mountains were on full display, spread out before us in full grandeur. The mountains were framed with clouds that brought new revelation to the color silver. I was stopped in my tracks by the glorious reality of the beautiful surrounding. It was breathtaking.

Though it had gone unseen the night before, that didn't mean it was not present. But when what was present was revealed to me, it changed my perspective. As the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 1:8-9, "With all wisdom and understanding, [God] made known [revealed] to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ."

### **Vision Realized in Prayer**

Business plans and mission statements have reduced the idea of vision to a simple list of corporate commitments. But as we saw with Dave and Kate, the vision we're recommending in marriage is a *joint vision* that is only revealed in prayer. A marriage vision isn't one that is handcrafted in a brainstorm meeting. Marriage vision is a calling delivered by the Lord.

Vision as revealed throughout the Scriptures wasn't a small group of disciples sitting down in a boardroom and brainstorming ideas. No, it started with a people desperately seeking God, pursuing with persistence until the Lord delivered.

## Praying Circles around Your Marriage

Acts 1 and 2 tell us how, after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples followed His instructions before His ascension and waited on the gift the Father had promised. They returned to their upper room in Jerusalem, and for ten days they "joined together constantly in prayer" (Acts 1:14). The disciples had a ten-day detox from their personal wants and individual plans. For days, they persisted in prayer and fasting, asking the Lord for instructions and clarity for their next steps. On that tenth day—the day of Pentecost—they saw a vision of "tongues of fire" on their heads, and they were all "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:3–4).

The disciples of Jesus first did the work of letting go of their plans, and then they were filled with a new vision. That's when Peter stood up and spoke for the disciples to the crowd of onlookers. He quoted the prophet of old from Joel 2: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17–18).

The disciples had done great things in the previous days. But something powerful happens when you let go of your vision for you and grab hold of God's vision for you. You go from your wants to God's dream. Might I have the audacity to speak the words of my namesake, the prophet Joel, over you as you read this book today? Perhaps God has something to say, which you haven't grasped yet because the grip of self-focus still has a hold on your soul. Don't be so captivated by a vision for self that you can't step into a vision for your marriage.

The American Dream is about pursuing what you want.

The biblical vision is about pursuing a God-given dream. It wasn't Peter who came up with the idea to share the gospel with the Gentiles in Acts 10. He was given a God-inspired vision.

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**PRAYER PROMPT:** Ask the Lord to begin to free you from your personal desires and individual plans so He can reveal a shared vision with your spouse.

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Nina and I really wrestled with vision for our marriage. It wasn't a date-night conversation—and done. It was many conversations and questions—and even the conflicts we endured that forced us to communicate about our individual priorities and how to bring them together. Ultimately, it was grappling with God over His purpose for who we are as a couple and how He wanted to use us together. In other words, our vision was conceived and realized in prayer.

Prayer forces us to expand our understanding, to envision something bigger than ourselves. Through prayer, the Holy Spirit brings conviction, understanding, and evaluation and speaks to us in areas we've held back from Him and others for so long.

According to Nehemiah, a young man we had counseled in preparation for his marriage to Jaymi, the power of prayer can change perspective. He told us, "Prayer has helped me realize I have two visions in life: a selfish vision and a godly vision. The first is one of comfort and control and security. But the second is concerned with principle and purpose and others. It's when I stop praying that I lose sight of His vision and start trying to

control things, worry about things, and think about the temporary. But when I'm on my knees, my true vision comes back into clarity. Prayer has become my anchor point that draws me back to healthy vision."

If you say, "I don't have a vision for our marriage," I'd ask you, "How many hours have you invested in prayer?" Let this be your place to start.

### **Vision through Persistence in Prayer**

In the Scriptures, each time vision was granted, it was given from God. Often when God starts stirring, you don't know what He has in the works. But when you let go of your plans and begin to seek God together in prayer, God will form and reveal His purposes.

A passage in Mark's gospel tells of a miracle Jesus performed. In Mark 8, Jesus pulls a blind man out of his routine and takes him outside the city. He puts mud on his eyes and touches him. The man experiences a miracle and gains his sight! But when Jesus asked him what he saw, the blind man responded in verse 24, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." He could see, but his sight was blurry.

This can be a theologically troubling passage for those who believe in the omnipotence and omniscience of Jesus. Why would Jesus ask the blind man what he saw if He is all-powerful and all-knowing? Jesus would often ask a question not so much to glean information as to impart revelation. Jesus forces the man to acknowledge the work of God on him but also to confront its lack of completion. He wanted him to come back for another touch. Jesus touched the man's eyes again, and he received clear vision.

## Vision Circle

I know that some of you feel like God has touched your marriage. You've seen good moments in your marriage. You have a love for the other person. But you also have frustration. There is confusion. *Is this marriage right? Why does it feel like we're pulling in opposite directions?* Your vision is cloudy, and if you're honest, it doesn't really make sense right now.

I suggest that God is not finished with the miracle yet. You have seen evidence that God is at work, even if it doesn't make sense right now. Maybe you and your spouse have felt a deep peace in certain moments of connection but can't put your finger on how to cultivate a marriage that will build on that strength. Or you've had stirring moments serving others but don't know how to practice mission on a regular basis. If you're in a cloudy place of confusion, we want to encourage you. Don't give up on your spouse or yourself in this season. Keep asking God to give you clear sight. In Mark 8, grace happened in the first touch when Jesus put His hand on the man to lead him out of the city. Sight happened in the second touch. But vision didn't come until the third touch! Don't walk away from your marriage before God gives the final touch.

### Vision Revealed in Retreat

For any couple asking the Lord to reveal vision for their marriage, we recommend that they plan an intentional time of seeking Him and asking for a revelation of vision. Nina and I have found that a vital tone setter for our marriage is a vision and planning retreat we take at the end of each year. We get a sitter for our kids and leave town. We put our plans on the table, seek God, and process together.

The primary goal of a vision retreat is to seek vision from God. It's a time to get on our knees or to log prayer-walking miles. We always bring a journal to write down ideas and promptings. Inevitably, the Lord begins to stir something in us.

It is important for us to do it year after year. Why? Because we have vision drift, forgetting our goals in the midst of everyday demands, and it's so easy to lose focus. Also, if we're honest, each season calls for a different version of renewed vision. It takes tweaking, prayer, and consistent attention to figure out how to keep working together toward the same goal.

We strongly recommend an annual vision retreat for every couple, and here are a few things we encourage you to include.

### *Get Out of Town*

Have you ever wondered how much of your day is just habit? Much of your day is mindless routine and repeated surroundings you no longer notice. Studies show that around 40 percent of people's daily activities are performed in the same situations. Initially your mind engages the prefrontal cortex in making decisions. But as you repeat the same behavior, the information is organized in your brain and shifts to the sensory motor loop, creating a neural signature. In other words, your actions become an automatic, unconscious behavior.

In a study analyzing how individuals form habits, University of Southern California psychology professor Wendy Wood explains, "When the habitual mind is engaged, our habits function largely outside of awareness. We can't easily articulate how we do our habits or why we do them."<sup>9</sup> We are going from the intentional response to habitual response. To get a new vision,

we have to break a neural signature so we can engage in ideas outside of our habitual responses.

Go back to the scene in Mark 8 with Jesus and linger on verse 23: “He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village.” Have you ever considered why Jesus led the blind man outside Bethsaida before He healed him? There are many theories about why Jesus would have wanted to lead the blind man outside the village, but He clearly had a purpose in changing his surroundings.

What mindless routine is holding you back from grasping a new vision? Is it your routine? Your habits? Your way of thinking? Is it where you reside? Mark Batterson often says, “Change of *place* + change of *pace* = change of *perspective*.”

I tease him that I translate that phrase into my own food-loving tendencies. Getting a new cuisine is often what transports my mind. So I’ve changed his saying to “Change of *venue* + change of *menu* = change within *you*!”

No matter how you say it, the point is that you need to get out of your normal. Rent a hotel room. Borrow a friend’s cabin or tent. Go to a new city. But find a place where your synapses can fire in a new way.

Jesus often retreated to places to pray. He did not allow the routine, the pressures, and the needs to overwhelm the connection to the Father. He consistently renewed His vision, separating himself from those demanding His attention.

### ***Prepare Your Heart***

If you want to gain a new vision, you must let go of your plans. When you go on a retreat, it has to start with letting go of what you want the other person to do and letting go of control.

## Praying Circles around Your Marriage

Remember, a vision for your marriage will not be controlled into existence. It will be birthed into existence through the Holy Spirit in *both* of you. This requires preparing your heart before you enter your time together. Start your retreat by identifying those assumptions, experiences, or plans that you need to lay at the altar. Let go. Listen to God. Listen to your spouse. Be open.

My parents were an interesting case study in regard to grasping a God-given vision while submitting to each other. Whenever they were at major decision points in their marriage, they would separately go into a time of prayer. And they would come back together when they felt a sense of direction. If they didn't align in vision, they wouldn't fight to get their own way, but they'd go back into individual prayer. They would repeat the process until they aligned with the Spirit and with each other. There was no coercion. It was a process of releasing personal preference and gaining God's direction.

### *Take a Look Back*

The best way to prepare our hearts is to start from a place of gratitude. Whenever we enter a prayer and planning retreat, we begin by taking time for a meal. We look back and remember the beautiful experiences, the sacred moments, and the revelations. It's important to set a tone by affirming who your spouse is, what they do, what you love about them, what you love doing together. It's not just a practice to make them feel good, but it's an exercise that helps you understand deep connection points as you take in the full picture of your unique marriage print together.



**ACTION PROMPT:** Plan a vision retreat. It may not feel like time well spent, but it will certainly be time well invested! Here are a few questions that can be prompts. You'll need to take some time to think and process these, so don't be offended if your partner can't provide an answer on the spot.

- What are those unique gifts, talents, and passions that God has placed within your spouse?
- Is there a moment when the purpose of your marriage became more important than having your own individual needs met?
- When have you seen God use your marriage?

Answer these questions together. Ask additional questions of your spouse to push for greater understanding. Do a deep dive into those areas of your relationship that have brought joy or a sense of purpose.

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Grace prepares us in marriage. Sight gives faith to us in marriage. But vision launches us forward in marriage. Don't stop short of God's full and clear vision for your marriage. Don't be satisfied with the attachment version of marriage. Ask God to reveal your marriage print. Just because you don't have clarity yet doesn't mean God isn't doing a completing work. Your invitation is to press into His presence through prayer.

The blind man in Mark 8 would never be the same again. Why? Because he had received clear vision. We've got to seek

## Praying Circles around Your Marriage

God for vision within our marriages! We often find ourselves subscribing to the self-centered, partially committed, compromised vision given by our culture, when God has something so infinitely greater for us.

Remember Apollo 13's insurmountable problems? They were stuck in space without the vision to be able to see their way home. They were disoriented, and that could have cost them their lives. Then they remembered a technique that had been tested during Apollo 8. They would use the earth's terminator, as well as the sun, to align correctly. The terminator is the line that delineates between night and day on earth. By gaining vision of a constant, the team was able to align correctly, to navigate problems, and to accomplish something that seemed impossible. Even though they were far from home, astronaut Jim Lovell viewed the moment when they regained direction as the turning point for accomplishing their mission. Vision had set their course. It can set yours too.