

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Win the Day – Seed the Clouds

Dr. Mark Batterson

On November 13, 1946 a single propeller airplane took off from Schenectady County Airport with a rather unique payload, six pounds of dry ice and a rather unique mission. The pilot was a chemist named Vincent Schaefer, who had been conducting clandestine experiments at General Electric Research Laboratory. Using a GE freezer chilled to sub zero temperatures, Schaefer created clouds using his breath as condensation. And seeded those manmade clouds with dry ice. The dry ice catalyzed a chemical reaction that caused snow crystals to form within that freezer. A few months later, it was time for a field test. So Schaefer, rented the aforementioned airplane flew it into a cumulus cloud and dumped the dry ice. Eye witnesses said on the ground that it looked like the cloud exploded. The snowfall was visible 40 miles away. The GE Monogram had a little bit of fun with Schaefer's benchmark breakthrough. It said, "Schaefer made it snow this afternoon over Pittsfield, next week, he walks on water."

Well, the science of seeding clouds is a marvel of modern science, but it's as old as the prophet Elijah. If you have a Bible you can meet me in 1 Kings 18. We're in a series called 'Win the Day'. We've talked about six habits, flip the script, kiss the wave, eat the frog, fly the kite, cut the rope, wind the clock, it is time for habit number seven, seed the clouds.

First Kings 18 let me set the scene. It has not rained in Israel for three and a half years. Desperate times call for desperate measures. And so this is when and where and why the prophet Elijah climbs to the top of Mount Carmel and seeds the clouds with dry ice, sort of.

Verse 41, *"Elijah said to Ahab, "Go get something to eat and drink, for I hear a mighty rainstorm coming!"* <sup>42</sup> *So Ahab went off to eat and drink. But Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel and bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.* <sup>43</sup> *"Go and look toward the sea," he said to his servant. And he went up and looked, "there is nothing there," he said. Seven times (seven times) Elijah said, "Go back".* <sup>44</sup> *The seventh time, the servant said, "I saw a little cloud about the size of a man's hand rising from the sea."* So Elijah shouted, *"Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'"* <sup>45</sup> *Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off.* <sup>46</sup> *The power of the Lord came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel."*

Now, I don't want us to get ahead of ourselves but I like this little subplot. We're not sure what route Elijah ran, but it was no less than 17 miles and it may have been as many as 30 miles and he beats

Ahab's chariot. Okay, I'm hearing Chariots of Fire in my head right now, pretty impressive. Long before four Pheidippides ran from Marathon to Athens Elijah ran from Mount Carmel to Jezreel - amazing.

All right, I want us to unpack habit number seven - how do you seed the clouds. Let me make Get as simple as 1, 2, 3.

- \*\*\*One, you seed the clouds with prophetic imagination.
- \*\*\*Two, you seed the clouds with patient persistence
- \*\*\*And hree you seed the clouds with bold prayers.

Ready or not, here we go. More than half a century ago, Dr. Alfred Tomatis, was confronted with the most curious case of his 50 year career as an otolaryngologist. A renowned opera singer had lost his ability to hit certain notes even though those notes were within his vocal range. He had been to other specialists all of them thought it was a vocal problem Doctor Tomatis thought otherwise. Using a sonometer, Dr. Tomatis discovered that this opera singer was producing 140-decibel sound waves at a meter's distance. That's louder than a military jet taking off from an aircraft carrier! Long story short - the opera singer was deafened by the sound of his own voice. He could no longer hit the notes because he could no longer hear the notes. "The voice can only reproduce," said Dr. Tomatis, "what the ear can hear." Now, the French Academy of Medicine called it the Tomatis effect and the ramifications are pretty profound.

Here's my theory. All of us have problems, okay—relational, emotional, spiritual and we think those problems are the problem, but they aren't really the problem, they're the presenting problem. The root cause of our problems nine times out of 10 is a hearing problem. It is ears that have been deafened to the still small voice of the Holy Spirit. How? Well I think some of it is just the white noise of culture. We are bombarded with news and fake news every minute of every hour of every day. We have online advertisers using click bait. We have social media algorithms designed to keep us in our echo chambers. Listen, it's hard for God to get a word in edgewise. But I don't think that's our primary problem. Our primary problem is self talk.

Now, this takes us back to habit number one, flip the script. And you may remember this about 60,000 thoughts, fire across our synapses every single day. According to the Cleveland Clinic, 80% of them are negative. Well, I think that's losing the battle before it even begins but remember, scripture is our script cure. It's the way that we renew our minds, Romans 11. It's the way we tell ourselves a better story. It's the way that we turn up the volume on God's voice.

Now, I asked a question a few weeks ago, I think it's worth asking again, what percentage of your thoughts, words and actions are a regurgitation of the news media you watch or the social media

channels that you follow? Now, let me flip that script. What percentage of your thoughts, words and actions are a revelation that you are getting from God's word? We have got to be grounded in God's word right about now. When we open the Bible, God opens his mouth. One of the best ways to turn up the volume is just a daily Bible reading plan.

All right, now, juxtapose that with verse 41. "*Elijah said to Ahab, go get something to eat and drink for I hear a mighty rainstorm coming.*" Okay, Elijah hears something no one else is even listening for. Elijah hears something that hasn't happened in more than three years. How? Elijah has a prophetic ear and that's where a prophetic imagination comes from. Let me give you a definition. Prophetic imagination is seeing the invisible, hearing the inaudible and believing the impossible. Walter Brueggemann says it this way, "The task is reframing so that we can re-experience the realities that are right in front of us from a different angle." Sometimes it takes the form of super natural gifts like a word of wisdom, or a word of knowledge. Sometimes it takes the form of super natural solutions like the spiritual gift of healing. Either way, I like to think of them as God ideas. They don't originate with us. And I'd rather have one God idea than 1000 good ideas.

Well, how do you get God ideas? It starts with a prophetic ear an ear that is fine tuned to the still small voice of the Holy Spirit and that's precisely what is happening in verse 41. It hasn't rained in three and a half years. I mean, this forecast is foolish, right? Like Elijah saying, it's gonna rain... it hasn't happened in more than three years. Elijah's out of touch with reality. Well, listen, that's because he's in touch with a reality that's beyond his five senses what he can taste and touch and see and smell and feel.

You know, there's an old axiom, 'those who hear not the music think the dancer is mad.' There ought to be some moments in our lives where people think we're crazy. Why? Because we don't operate the way that the world does. We operate out of prophetic imagination.

Two - You seed the clouds with patient persistence. Almost a decade ago, wrote a book called *The Circle Maker*. In the first century BC there was a drought not unlike the drought that was experienced in Elijah's day. It threatened to destroy a generation, the generation before Jesus, but there was a man with an Elijah anointing. And so the people asked him to pray and here's what he did. Honi took his staff and he drew a circle in the sand. Then he knelt in that circle and he prayed this prayer, "Sovereign Lord, I swear before your great name, that I will not leave this circle until you have mercy upon your children." Prayer went up, rain came down. Listen, religious leader said that, "Hey, that just like that was a little bit too much like that's going a little bit too..." But you can't argue with a miracle. It was a prayer that saved a generation. Can I remind us we don't pray ASAP prayers - as soon as possible? We pray ALAT - as long as it takes.

Now according to the Talmud Honi, the Circle Maker was captivated by one phrase in one verse of scripture, Psalm 126:1. It says, "*When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion,*" referring to the Babylonian captivity, "*we were like men who dream.*" Now that phrase, we were like men who dream

provoked a question that Honi the Circle Maker wrestled with his entire life. And the question was this, is it possible for a person to dream continuously for 70 years? Hold that thought.

Longitudinal studies have shown that over time, as we age, there is a shift in the cognitive center of gravity from right brain to left brain. Now, this is an oversimplification but the right brain is the locus of imagination, left brain locus of logic. And so that neurological tendency presents a problem. If you aren't careful, at some point, you stop living out of imagination and you start living out of memory. In other words, you stop creating the future, you start repeating the past, you stop living by faith and start living by logic, and that's the day that we stopped living and we start dying. Listen, most people die long before the date on their death certificate but it doesn't have to be that way. Without a vision, people perish. But the opposite is true. Vision is a preservative. If you have a vision, you are never past your prime. If you have a vision you never age out. I love Caleb is strong at 85 as he was at four. How is that even possible? Because he had vision and vision is an expression of prophetic imagination. But guess what it takes some patient persistence. If you want to dream big, you better think long because it's going to take longer than you like.

Is it possible to dream continuously for 70 years? Listen, one of two things is going to happen either memory is going to overtake imagination or imagination is going to overtake memory. Imagination is the way that we seed the clouds to the third and fourth generation. We have a theology of the city, Jeremiah 29. We are planting gardens and building houses. Why? Because we want to do things that'll make a difference 70 years from now. That's why we built DC Dream Center. We're trying to change some statistics one child at a time. It's why we're building out phase two, our kid's ministry space, our child development center. Listen, its Psalm 22:31 babies not yet conceive will hear the good news.

Let me zoom out. I love verse 44, *"I saw a cloud the size of a man's hand."* That's awfully small. Listen, don't despise the day of small beginnings. In 1997, we hosted an outreach called the Convoy of Hope. Fun fact, it was on the five acre property parking lot right next to Union Station, which is now the Security and Exchange Commission. We gave away 50,000 pounds of groceries to about 5,000 people but here's the backstory. NCC was a church of 50 people when we pulled off this outreach. Now convoy said you're going to need 400 volunteers.

Okay, that doesn't add up but we learned a couple of lessons. One is that you have to do things that are beyond your ability, beyond your resources, beyond your education, beyond your experience, that's when and where and why God shows up and shows off. Now I'm not sure who said this but many, many years ago, I remember hearing a pastor say at some conference that I was attending, that you need to do things that are twice your size. In other words, you need to stretch your faith. Convoy of Hope was passed our pay grade it felt a little bit like the feeding of the 5,000 and literally, that's how many people there were. But when you add God to the equation five plus two equals 5,000 remainder 12. Long story short, we gave away 50,000 pounds of groceries and I think it set the table for who we have become as a

church. In fact, it conceived a couple of core convictions, God's gonna bless us in proportion to how we give to missions and care for the poor in our city. We put that into practice.

Church belongs in the middle of the marketplace, we made a decision that we're going to be a church that rolls up its sleeves, puts a towel around its waist and serves the city. Why? Because the church that stays within its four walls is not a church at all.

Now fast forward this is about a decade later that we hosted another Convoy of Hope and we doubled down. This time, we gave away I think it was 100,000 pounds of groceries. I think about 10,000 people showed up. Listen, the way you steward a miracle is by believing God for bigger and better miracles, we did it. And by the way, I think there was a hurricane that came through and we had to delay a day but it was amazing. And so after the event, we're kind of we're sort of doing this, we're patting ourselves on the back a little bit. And that's when I hear a still small voice of the Holy Spirit. And it said something like this, "Now I want you to do this every day." Wait, what? I mean, it took us a year to coordinate this convoy. Well, fast forward in 2017 we build the DC Dream Center. You gave 5.5 million so that we could build it debt free. And it is a place where hope becomes habit. We are impacting our city one child at a time but then COVID hit. And so on March 16, we have to pivot and the DC Dream Center becomes the only food distribution center east of the river.

Do you know that last year we serve 54,619 meals 559,366 pounds that we gave to the community that we love and serve? As I see it, it was a fulfillment of the dream that we had a decade before. Let me connect the dots. I think everything that God is doing right now is a result of seeding the clouds in 1997. Now, here's the funny thing. I'm just gonna keep it real. The day after that outreach in '97, I remember being so discouraged, because again, we were a church of about 50 people. And so you know, when a visitor visits, okay, and we had like, maybe five people show up the next day. I'm like, out of 5,000 people like what? And so I was a little discouraged, but you know what I learned when you are faithful here. It doesn't necessarily mean that God's gonna bless you right here, right now. He might bless you over there and then, but somehow, someway, somewhere, God is gonna show up and show off his faithfulness. It's up to him to determine when, where, and how. And I think is so much of what the Lord has done is a result of us seeding the clouds in those early years.

Now, it says that seven times Elijah told his servant to go back. In my Bible reading plan this last week, I found myself in Proverbs 24. And I took note of verse 16, it says, "*Though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again.*" And here's one way that I study scripture. If there's a phrase that kind of gets in my spirit a little bit, I'll plug it into a concordance or I'll do a Bible search and see where else that phrase pops up. And so I took that little phrase seven times and pretty amazing how often it surfaces. Now, seven is the number of perfection or completion. Sometimes it's used literally; sometimes it's used figuratively, either way, an awful lot of sevens in the Bible. Abraham bows down to the ground seven times in Genesis 22. The priests consecrate the altar by sprinkling it seven times. The word of the Lord is like silver refined seven times, Psalm 12. And then Jesus ups the ante and says, "Don't forgive seven

times, why don't you try 70 times seven". But there are three inciting incidents that I love. One, the Israelites circle Jericho, do you remember this, seven days but then seven times on the seventh day. And then Naaman dips into the Jordan River seven times. And then you've got Elijah praying for rain seven times.

Now, I love history. One of my favorite branches of history is counterfactual theory. It asks the what if questions. You know what if the Israelites had stopped on day six? You know, enough is enough? Or what if Naaman ah, I mean, come on six dips, seriously. Or what if Elijah that sixth time just, ah, I'm gonna give it up? Well, they would have forfeited the miracle right before it happened. See, patient persistence is about keeping on keeping on. Jesus said ask, seek and knock those are present imperative verbs. In other words, keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking.

Finally, number three; we seed the clouds with bold prayer. Next week, we'll release our annual report. Really, it's a praise report. You'll find it on our website [national.cc](http://national.cc), you can download the digital version. Pretty amazing what the Lord did in 2020, despite the fact that we didn't gather most of the year on the weekends. Now, along with those 54,619 meals that I referenced that we serve through the DC Dream Center, you gave \$528,000 to a COVID relief fund that allowed us to assist 7,638 people. The album that we recorded and produced the Jesus Way; it's been downloaded more than half a million times on Spotify alone. We had 290 people signed up or registered for alpha online, 458 hands raised at our online campus. But of all the metrics I think the one lead measure that sets the table for what I believe God is going to do in and through this church; I think it's this one. The day after Pentecost Sunday 2020 we started climbing something that we affectionately call the upper zoom. We gather there 7:14am, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday mornings and we had 101 prayer meetings last year. Average attendance, if you multiply that by time spent in that upper zoom, adds up to 845 days, collectively, more than two years of prayer. Listen that is going to pay some compound interest. And I might just say this, man, we were interceding inauguration week. Listen, sometimes, I think it's the things that didn't happen that we have the hardest time praising God for because we don't really know exactly how it didn't happen. Listen, prayer, I think is powerful sometimes, as a preventative measure. So grateful for a peaceful transfer of power. God answered those prayers.

Now Jesus said, *"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."* It was on a Silent Retreat last year when I felt like the Lord just impressed this on my heart. Listen; if you will be a house of prayer, I will turn you into a house of healing, a house of dreams, a house of miracles, a house of reconciliation for all people. Prayer is the lead measure. You can't plan Pentecost but if you pray for 10 days, Pentecost is gonna happen.

Here's what I think. I think the disciples were counting up 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10 days in the upper room. I think God was counting down 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1 and there's this moment where God pours out his Spirit on his people. And listen, as we count up, God is counting down. We're gonna keep praying, some bold prayers. I will tell you this, God honors bold prayers, because bold prayers, honor God.

Let me close with this. In 853 BC, a king named Jehoram assumes the throne of Judah. He's the fifth king of the southern kingdom. It's 117 years after the death of David, and this is what 2 Kings 8:18 says, *"He did evil in the eyes of the Lord."* Now Jehoram actually killed his brothers so that he could get the throne. But that's not the end of the story. Here's what it says, *"Nevertheless, nevertheless, for David's sake, for David's sake, for David's sake,"* That little phrase reappears half a dozen times in the Kings and Chronicles. It says, *"For David's sake, the Lord was not willing to destroy Judah."* This is so powerful to me. David is long gone. This is six kings later, but God does not forget his promises. God does not forget his people. Can I suggest that there are blessings that you've experienced in your life that you don't deserve? But someone did something 117 years ago, and you are reaping the benefit? They seeded the clouds. Listen, there's no expiration date on love, no expiration date on faith, no expiration date on prayer.

There have been moments in my life where one of my earliest memories is my grandfather praying for me, hearing him intercede for me. He died when I was six, his prayers did not. There have been moments in my life where the Holy Spirit has whispered to my spirit, "Mark, prayers of your grandfather are being answered in your life, right now." It's one reason why I dedicated this book to my grandparents. Listen, we are the beneficiaries of prayers that we know nothing about. We are harvesting fields we didn't plant. We are drinking from wells we did not dig. We live in houses we did not build. We think right here right now God is thinking nations and generations. We think that what God does for us is for us, but it's never just for us it's always for the third and fourth generation. Prophetic imagination, patient persistence, bold prayers it adds up to some amazing miracles seed the clouds