

# PRAY BIG

GOD CAN DO  
SO MUCH MORE!

CINDY MERCER

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# Chapter 1

**M***arch 19, 1997*

My day started with a small, half-hearted prayer and low expectations. It felt safe that way—certainly less room for disappointment if things didn't work out.

I had already learned life sometimes threw painful, unexpected curveballs that destroyed dreams. Some dreams shattered so completely that all of my church activities, Bible-study groups, good intentions, and hard work couldn't put them back together again.

I longed for God's favor in my life. But it felt elusive.

And even if I ever *really* found it, I still knew some of my idyllic life plans were gone forever.



I was a proper Southern girl—with proper Southern dreams. My grand life story—first designed when my young heart brimmed with confidence and hope—held four vital pieces:

1. I would be a valued employee in a respected job.
2. I would be an outstanding wife—a cheerleader and support to my successful husband who would lavishly return my devotion.
3. I would be that “best mom ever,” showering love over my adoring children.

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4. We would all sit together in church—the polished, perfect family. My husband would gently hold my hand or put his arm around me as we received our weekly experience of God. Then we'd head home to go four-wheelin' or fishing or to ride horses.

Of course, during the week, we'd all drive back to church (in our Suburban) to attend small-group Bible studies and youth activities. My grand life story included *plenty* of God activities scheduled into *all* the suitable places.



I grew up playing along the Red River in a remote corner of southwest Arkansas surrounded by lush fields of corn, soybeans, and wheat. Bald eagles soared overhead and built nests in the fragrant loblolly pines spearing up along the banks. For 130 years, my ancestors owned and operated the Spring Bank Ferry, carrying the sparse traffic of State Highway 160 on the five-minute crossing from bank to bank.

On hot summer days, my adored older brother Rodney and I would ride our bikes down the slope, out across the ramp, and onto the bright orange wooden ferry. My dad, who passed the stringent Coast Guard test on his first try, would pilot us over to a sandbar where we could safely play. We would run around, swim, and build sandcastles until he got off work.

Then he'd load our bikes into the back of his truck and drive us home to eat one of Momma's delicious meals. There would be plenty of sweet tea or grape Kool-Aid and a homemade blackberry cobbler, made with blackberries freshly picked along our country road.

My grand life story included a chapter that looked just exactly like this—the perfect loving family.



One day I realized the chapter wasn't there anymore and never would be again.

Like the Red River snaking south, my life wound in and out of two failed marriages. I first married at the young age of eighteen, only to divorce four years later. After less than a year, I married again, and that marriage also ended with a jarring break and lingering pain.

Whole chapters of my beautiful dream were now forever deleted. There would be no husband sitting lovingly beside me in church. I wouldn't be a

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wonderful wife encouraging my successful man or building a home and a future.

My shiny hopes faded to bitter disappointment—a dull aching regret. I still sheepishly went to church most weeks, but I sat alone—feeling like everyone else knew how miserable I was.

Yet there was one bright blessing of joy and purpose in my life—my precious two-year-old son Tyler, born during my second marriage. I vowed to support and care for him. I would dig in and build something strong and worthwhile for Tyler and me.

By now, I was twenty-six years old and working as a surgical nurse at Jefferson Regional Medical Center in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. That first piece of my dream, at least, was still intact. I thought I might go back to school and continue my education, but I felt uncertain about the best way to juggle everything. I considered moving back to live near my parents.

But first, I needed to get through the looming evening of March 19, 1997. I felt a mix of anticipation and dread and couldn't believe I'd gotten caught up in something so ridiculous.



A few weeks earlier, I'd gone for my normal appointment at Rumors Hair Salon. I had known Donna, my stylist, for about a year and enjoyed her thoughtfulness and sense of humor. But that day, I learned she had quite the agenda prepared for me.

She didn't waste any time launching forth as she began to section and cut my hair.

"So, you don't have a boyfriend, do you, Cindy?" *Snip, snip, snip.*

Sensing potential quicksand, I replied quickly, "Hmm, not exactly. I'm actually making plans to move back where my parents live." (My plans grew firmer by the minute.)

*Snip, snip, snip.* "Well, the process of moving could take a little while, couldn't it? Wouldn't you like to meet someone in the meantime?"

"Uh . . ."

"Girl, I'd love for you to meet my brother Rick! He's just the best! I know I'm probably a bit biased, but he's such a great guy. He deserves someone as nice as you in his life."

I wondered if I should bolt and finish cutting my hair at home. But Donna was just getting warmed up.

"He's been divorced about five years now, but he's on really good terms

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with his ex. They even share joint custody. His boys are precious as all get-out—Brooks is six, and Farron is seven.”

*Snip, snip, snip.*

Donna rolled on. “Did I mention that Rick’s a CPA? He actually has two offices! His clients just adore him! One office is in town, and the other is out at his farm. Girl, you should see that farm he’s got going. He contracts with a nationwide poultry industry and has lots of people working for him. Rick’s a go-getter for sure!”

Clearly, Donna thought her brother hung the moon. And the more she shared, the more I felt a tiny ribbon flame of interest begin to spark and flicker deep inside. Rick Mercer sounded quite intriguing.

As I handed Donna the check for her services, I told her I would *think* about meeting him and *perhaps* be in touch with her.

“That’s great, girl! Don’t wait too long,” she grinned.



As busy as I was, I couldn’t stop thinking about the possibility of meeting someone as genuinely nice as Donna’s brother sounded. The days flew by as I mulled it over.

My curiosity took a giant leap forward when *two* other friends separately approached me about a great guy they wanted me to meet—a real pillar of the community named Rick Mercer.

After the third independent endorsement, I finally caved in and called Donna for his number. *A real friend would sure feel good in my life about now*, I reasoned. *I would hate to miss out on a golden opportunity.*

That night, I sat in my little living room with butterflies in my stomach as I dialed the phone number. *This is going to be just another mistake in my stellar collection*, I told myself. *Don’t get your hopes up.*

“Hello.” I jumped a little when Rick answered.

“Hi, Rick,” I answered, trying to sound casual, “this is Cindy—Donna’s friend.”

“Hi, Cindy! I’m not sure how she talked you into this, but thanks for taking the time.”

I couldn’t believe how easy Rick was to talk with—his deep, warm, kind voice and genuine interest flowed over my wounded, aching heart. My little flame of hope fanned a bit higher.

We discovered lots of shared family values. He told me about coaching his son’s ball team and building forts with his boys. *He is a devoted dad*, I thought approvingly.

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We exchanged the glossy version of our life stories—none of the dirty laundry at this point, of course.

After Rick graduated high school, he worked offshore in the Gulf of Mexico, making big money with his merchant marine license. (I already knew, courtesy of Donna, that he drove both a Porsche and a Jaguar.) Once the oil crunch hit, he went to college, flew through with a straight 4.0 grade point average, and aced his certified public accountant exam in one pass.

He came back home and bought a house with fifteen acres. His CPA business now served four hundred clients spread between the two offices. And his thriving commercial poultry operation, with four large poultry houses, was on track for expansion.

I already knew his family was highly respected in the area—now, I found myself enamored with his goals and aspirations. *Two separate businesses with employees*, I marveled. *You don't build that kind of setup unless you're responsible.*

Against all the odds, it was beginning to feel like I'd hit the jackpot. But even though Rick sounded like quite a catch, I proceeded cautiously, moving along to my list of potential deal-breaking questions:

Do you believe in God? (Of course.)

Do you smoke or do drugs? (No.)

Do you drink? (Only socially.)

Drinking alcohol was completely acceptable to me because everyone I knew consumed alcohol occasionally. I had grown up with my parents hosting what we called “play days.” Daddy was a professional calf-roper for fifteen years, and we had a roping arena at our home. People would come from all over, bringing their horses to practice roping cattle or to enjoy riding in the arena. We would set up tables under the trees and grill burgers while everyone talked and laughed and music played. Momma always made her famous chocolate pies.

Most all the adults drank alcohol at play days, except Momma. Sometimes, after several hours of drinking, things might morph and become a bit tense. Someone might start cussin' or spoiling for a fight, and Daddy would have to run him off. Or maybe sometimes I noticed my parents might argue a bit more after Daddy drank for an evening, but come next morning, everything was fine again.

Social drinking was normal—*everybody* did it. I didn't see any red flags there.

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Before the conversation was over, Rick asked if we could meet face-to-face. I still felt a little wary, but my flame of hope was burning too strongly to turn back now. Was he too good to be true? There was only one way to find out.

I agreed to meet him on March 19. There. It was settled—my first official blind date.



In the days that followed, panic set in. *Eeeeeek! What was I thinking? I should just back out now.* A million excuses began running through my mind.

The big question looping repeatedly was, *Have you really stooped to this kind of desperation, Cindy? What if he looks like a squat green toad—or an ax murderer?*

The evening finally came, and I opened the door slowly. My first glance left me pleasantly relieved. My dreaded “squat green toad” looked more like Prince Charming with gorgeous green eyes wearing an L. L. Bean sweater.

“Are you Rick?” I asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” he answered smiling.

The moment felt strangely awkward. *What do you expect from a blind date, Cindy?*

But the awkwardness quickly disappeared. And the more we talked, the more I noticed something else disappearing. The crushing sense of hopelessness and failure settled so heavily in my heart now began lifting and vanishing like the early morning mist over the Red River.

Talking and laughing easily, we went to Bonanza for dinner. But the food didn't matter. We were lost in captivating discovery.

Our conversation ran deep—focused on family and future dreams. We also talked a lot about God.

Rick grew up attending the Methodist church, where his mom was a matriarch and pillar of support. “I got a pin for faithful attendance,” he told me, “because my mom took me to church for so many years in a row.”

“My momma was the same way,” I smiled. “We went to Mount Zion Baptist Church every Sunday. Pastor Allen Hoven always made an altar call. When I was twelve, I made my pilgrimage to the front. I felt God sort of pull me out of the seat and draw me down the aisle. Pastor Hoven asked if I wanted to give my life to the Lord, and I said yes.”

I described for Rick how special I felt on the day I was baptized. We didn't have robes—I just wore a little red-striped T-shirt and my blue jeans. But I

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never forgot going down into the water in that beautiful, simple ceremony. The church gave me a small, red Bible that I treasured always.

Rick shared his private, unusual commitment to God too.

“You know how people make a wish when they see a shooting star?” he asked. “Well, for as many years back as I can remember, whenever I see a shooting star, my wish is that I could give my whole heart to God. I don’t think I’ve figured out how to do it quite right yet, but I know I want to.”

My heart flooded with joy. Our lives were poised and responsive for more of Jesus! Hope was now fully alive, and I knew I was part of a miracle.

My grand life story was being resurrected from the ashes in front of my eyes.

Only God could bring a new life like this. Only God could drop the missing piece of my puzzle right into my lap so unexpectedly.

But as the evening wrapped up and we returned to my house, I felt the old nagging doubts and awkwardness slinking back. *Should I ask him in? What if he doesn’t feel anything at all like I do? What if he only intends to say good night and never see me again?*

I fumbled out, “Would you like to come in for a bit?”

I needn’t have worried. Our easy conversation quickly returned as we sat side by side on my blue-and-whited striped sofa. I was pretty sure he was about to ask me for another date.

But instead, Rick looked deep into my eyes and spoke with a very soft and determined voice.

“Cindy, you’re what I’ve been looking for—and you’re all I need. We’ve talked about giving our lives to God and serving Him. I meant it, and you meant it, and I believe God knows we mean it.

“Cindy, will you marry me?”

I didn’t even hesitate.



As soon as Rick left, I ran and jumped on my bed like a teenager! Without even looking at the time, I called my close friend Kristi. She had been anxiously waiting for all the details of the evening. Not realizing it was two in the morning, I bubbled and gushed out a moment-by-moment recall of the night’s events. She couldn’t believe how well everything had gone. I couldn’t contain my excitement any longer. She about passed out as I informed her I was going to marry my blind date, Rick Mercer!

That night I started a brand-new journal.

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March 19, 1997

*Tonight I met the love of my life, the one I want to love, take care of, laugh and cry with, and grow old with.*

*Dear Lord, You are so good to Rick and me. We prayed about this, and we know this is Your will and the right plan for us. We both know without a shadow of a doubt that we are going to spend the rest of our lives together.*

*Thank You, God, for sending him to me, and I promise You we will serve You. You have blessed us far more than we could believe.*



My grand life story was back on track and better than ever! The journey ahead felt full of promise and hope.

Maybe some people would wonder how in the world I could say yes to a marriage proposal on a blind first date. But they'd understand eventually—after they saw the beautiful life we would build together.

I overflowed with confidence that everything I'd discovered about Rick contained all the essential pieces for my grand life dream. I believed with all my heart that God was providing an incredible answer to my longing for *something more*, and I wasn't going to miss it.

I was off to the promised land with Rick Mercer!

But I didn't realize how quickly things could change.

I didn't know God was about to show me that my grand life story was far too small for the Author of the universe.

I had no idea He was about to transform the *ordinary* pieces of my dream with an *exceedingly abundant* story only He could write.

And I had no idea God's grand life story for Cindy looked radically different than *all* my prayers—or that each piece of my dream would shatter into a million shards before I would see His.