

“The Prayer of Jabez” (Part 1)

A few years back a little 93-page book called *The Prayer of Jabez* created quite a stir. Published in the year 2000, it sold 9 million copies in the first 2 years. It was #1 on both the New York Times and Publisher’s Weekly bestsellers lists weeks and weeks and weeks. It received several prestigious Book of the Year awards. We now have a Prayer of Jabez Bible study, a journal, a devotional book, and also Jabez posters, back packs, and jewelry. There is even a music CD!

The book itself is about a little known character in the Old Testament named Jabez, who prayed a brief prayer with tremendous results. In the Preface, author Dr. Bruce Wilkinson calls the Prayer of Jabez a “daring prayer that God always answers.” He says it radically changed what he experiences of God’s power, and that it has led thousands of believers to experience miracles on a regular basis.

However, the book is not without its critics. One called it a “defective understanding of prayer.” Another Christian leader said while the book is not evil, it “captures everything that’s silly about contemporary evangelical Christianity” It has been called simplistic, that it doesn’t appreciate the mystery of God, and that God doesn’t always answer prayers. Some have said it is just a new version of the “prosperity gospel” – that if you just pray and believe, God will bless you with health and wealth. One critic said it’s very American, because it’s practical and promises results. I read a newspaper article about the book that pointed out what some of the critics were saying. I decided that this book sounds rather suspect, because the Jabez prayer seemed rather selfish. ***Then I read the book and I changed my mind!*** (Have you ever done that? You make a judgment about something or about someone without getting all the facts? You evaluate someone just on hearsay, even though you don’t know or have never met that person?)

Jabez is only mentioned in two verses of the Bible! Here they are: “Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and his mother called his name Jabez, saying ‘Because I bore him in pain.’ And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, ‘Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!’ So God granted him what he requested” (1 Chronicles 4:9-10). (This is from the New King James Version of the Bible). These three sentences are tucked away in the middle of a long, boring genealogy! The first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles gives the family tree of the Hebrew tribes. While this may have been of interest to the Hebrew historian, it is dull reading for us. (In fact, if you are having trouble getting to sleep at night, you might try reading this rather than taking a couple of sleeping pills!) It’s like the writer is plodding along giving family histories, then all of sudden: “Oh, by the way, here’s something I don’t want you to miss...let me tell you about Jabez and his prayer”

“*Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers...*” (1 Chronicles 4:9). ***Here’s a man who stood head and shoulders above the rest!*** Jabez wanted to excel. He wasn’t satisfied with mediocrity. He wanted to be best he could be for God! Is there anything wrong with wanting greatness? Most of us set our sights too low. But God has bigger plans and dreams for most of us than we have for ourselves! Many of us live in what someone has called the “*prison of predictability*”. We live in a rut. It has been said that a rut is just a grave with the ends kicked out! *Jabez wanted to stand out above the crowd...and his prayer was a key to that!*

Note that Jabez did not have a very promising beginning! “His mother called his name Jabez, saying ‘Because I bore him in pain’” (1 Chronicles 4:9). The name Jabez means “pain”, literally “he will cause pain”. Childbirth is always painful, but apparently there was something extra painful about Jabez’ birth. Perhaps the delivery was traumatic. Or, if the pain is not physical pain, maybe there was emotional pain surrounding his birth. It might have been financial stress, or the baby’s father might have abandoned the mother and newborn son, or maybe the father died. We simply don’t know. But whatever the reason, can you imagine the shame and embarrassment in being named “pain”. Picture excited grandparents, questioning the parents, “What did you name our new grandson?” Or friends asking, “What’s the name of your new baby? “*We’ve named him ‘Pain’!*” I can’t help but wonder if Jabez had to put up with teasing from other kids, “Here’s come the pain!” What’s even worse, for Hebrews, a person’s *name* signified *character*, in some cases the name *defined a person’s future*. It’s like every time his mom called, “*Jabez.....*” it was like she was saying, “Son, you’re such a pain.” “You’ll always be a pain”!

Some of us have had unpromising beginnings. Maybe our dad was a drunk, or our mom or dad went off and left the family. Or our parents had a nasty divorce while we growing up. Or our classmates at school made fun of our looks, or tormented us in some other way. It could be that we never got much encouragement from anyone in our home. Lance Wilson is a gifted pastor of a large, thriving church. He is the 15th of 17 children! He admits, “You can’t make me believe that my daddy had me in mind.” Surely Jabez must have felt the sting of his name. But he turned his pain into a *prayer*. Foks, if there is pain in our past, it doesn’t have to keep us in an emotional prison for life. We can let our pain be a thing that motivates us to move on and become great for God!

“And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, ‘O that you would bless me indeed’” (1 Chronicles 4:10). In spite of an unpromising past, Jabez must have grown up hearing about the God of Israel – and how God had delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, and given them a land and a future. Maybe...he thought...God can give *me* a future!

“O that you would bless me indeed...” There is an urgency about his prayer. The word “indeed” in Hebrew is like adding exclamation points. Please, bless me *a lot*. Here’s where many think this a *selfish prayer*. It’s ok to ask for God to bless others....yes! But to ask God’s blessings on ourselves – that’s *selfish!* Perhaps we need to understand what the word “bless” means in the Bible. Today we use the word “bless” a lot. “Lord, we ask your blessing on this service.” “Bless our country, bless the people we know who are in need.” At offering time we may pray, “Bless these gifts we now present to you, God.” The word is vague and overused.

Dr. Wilkinson writes, “to bless in the biblical sense means to ask for or impart supernatural favor. When we ask for God’s blessing, we’re not asking for more of what we could get for ourselves. We’re crying out for the wonderful, unlimited goodness that only God has the power to know about or to give us...notice, (Jabez) left it entirely up to God to decide what the blessings would be and where, when and how Jabez would receive them.” This is not the prosperity gospel – where if we pray and believe God, God will shower us with a large, elegant

home, a lot of money, and a BMW and a Lexus in our garage. To ask for God's blessing is "wanting for ourselves nothing more and nothing less that *what God wants* for us" (Wilkinson).

Why would God not want us to ask for that kind of blessing? Perhaps Jabez thought back to the story of **Abraham**. God came to Abraham and said, "I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:22). The result? Salvation history is set in motion! Through Abraham and his descendants, the whole earth was to be blessed!

Maybe Jabez remembered the story of **Jacob** – the cheat, and the night Jacob wrestled with God and insisted that God bless him: "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26). And do you remember what happened? God *did* bless Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel, and transformed him from a life of cheating and deception to make him useful to God.

There is nothing wrong with asking God to bless us a lot, so that we can have all of what God wants for us and be able to bless others as a result! I once had an audio cassette of Bruce Wilkinson describing how he learned the importance of asking for our heavenly Father's blessings. He was sitting in the living room with his family one day when one of his sons came up to him and said, "Dad, will you bless me?" Bruce was a bit taken back, and said to the boy something like, "You know I bless you, son." But the boy insisted, "No, dad, I mean, will you *really bless me!*" Bruce shares how this earnest request from the son for his dad's blessing on his life moved Bruce to tears.

We are often not blessed because we don't ask for God's blessing! The late Paul Harvey, the noted radio commentator, told the story of a three year old boy who went to the grocery store with his mother. Before they entered she said, "Now you're not going to get any chocolate chip cookies, so don't even ask." She put him in the shopping cart, and he was doing fine until they came to the cookie section. He stood up in the seat and piped up: "Mom, can I have some chocolate chip cookies?" She scolded: "I told you not even to ask. You're not going to get any at all." They continued down the aisles, but in the mother's search for something, she had to go back to the cookies aisle. "Mom, can I please have some chocolate chip cookies?" She again replied: "I told you, you can't have any. Now sit down and be quiet." Finally, they approached the checkout lane. The little boy, sensing that this was his last chance, just before they got into the line, stood up in the seat of the cart and shouted at the top of his lungs, "In the name of Jesus, may I have some chocolate chip cookies!" Everybody around just laughed. Some applauded. And, according to Paul Harvey, due to the generosity of other shoppers, the boy and his mother left with 23 boxes of chocolate chip cookies!

Our God has enough blessing to go around for everybody! God is honored when we cry out for Him to bless us indeed – *bless us a lot* – to want nothing more nor nothing less than ***all God wants for us!***

Jabez goes on in his prayer: "Oh, that you would bless me indeed, ***and enlarge my territory***" (1 Chronicles 4:10). Here too, at first glance, this seems like a *selfish* request. The word translated "territory" in some translations is the word "borders" – enlarge my borders! Jabez is

Jabez is praying for more land. Israel had conquered the land of Canaan, and divided it up among the twelve tribes. As a farmer or herdsman, Jabez looked over the spread his family had passed down to him, he looked at the fence lines and boundary markers, and perhaps thought: “Surely I was born for more than this!” So he prayed, “Enlarge my territory!”

Bruce Wilkinson suggests that this is more than just a request for land. Jabez wants more responsibility and more opportunity *to make a mark for God*. ***In this part of the prayer, we are asking God to enlarge our life that we may make a greater impact for Him!*** Wilkinson says he is often asked by business people, “Is it right for me to ask God for more business?” His answer: Yes – ***if*** you are doing business God’s way and glorifying Him, it’s not only right to ask for more; *God is waiting* for you to ask for more! Here again, this is not just asking for selfish purposes, like let me make more money, let me live in luxury. It is asking that our sphere of influence can be enlarged to impact people for God! So, for a homemaker, to “enlarge my territory” might mean that you ask God to increase your influence within your family and in the contacts you make as a wife and mother.

When we begin to seriously pray that God will expand our opportunities to touch more lives for God, *this is where things get really exciting!* God can arrange “Jabez appointments”. He gives some thrilling examples of this in his book. (We can also go online, Google “Jabez testimonies”, and hear other testimonies.

For example, the experience of a lady named Maxine. She finished the book *The Prayer of Jabez* on a Friday night, and prayed for a “Jabez appointment.” Saturday morning while driving home from a prayer breakfast, she missed the turn to her house (though she had been taking that street for 25 years). She went to the next block, and the detour took her past the house of a friend who died 2 years ago. Maxine had been having a lot of concern for her deceased friend’s 19 year-old daughter. She had heard things about her that were disturbing. She tried to talk to the several times girl, but the girl avoided her. As she went by the house, the 19 year-old was there in front of the car. They saw each other, but the girl didn’t scoot off. Maxine got out of the car. They hugged and cried, and talked a while. Then the 19 year-old said she was concerned about one of her brothers having serious marital problems. Maybe he would talk. The next day, there was a knock at Maxine’s door, and her *two brothers* were there. They came in and talked for several hours. While they were there, the phone rang, and it was the wife of one of the brothers, saying that unless they got help, she was going to leave him. Later that day, they all talked at Maxine’s house. The couple afterwards went to a counseling center to work on a treatment plan for their problems and their marriage.

God is looking for people who want His blessing, who want the Lord to enlarge their boundaries so they can make a greater impact for Him! Next week, we will continue to look at the rest of Jabez’ prayer found in 1 Chronicles. I will also share some of my experiences since I started praying this prayer.

