

THE PRAYER OF JABEZ By Max Frazier

In 2000, Dr. Bruce Wilkinson wrote a small book describing the experiences he had over the many years of his ministry with praying a very simple little prayer - the prayer of Jabez. Suddenly this little 92-page volume rushed to the top of the New York Times best-selling list. It seemed that everyone with whom you talked had either read or heard about the prayer of Jabez.

So, is there need for anything further to be written about Jabez and his prayer? Last July I was approached by a church leader here in the Twin Cities and invited to teach a four-week class on this prayer. I asked myself, "What can I offer that has not already been given?" Yet I consented and dedicated myself to studying the above passage during the month. The more I studied, the more God revealed to me the heart of the man Jabez.

JABEZ, AN HONORABLE MAN

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request. (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

In 2000, Dr. Bruce Wilkinson wrote a small book describing the experiences he had over the many years of his ministry with praying a very simple little prayer - the prayer of Jabez. Suddenly this little 92-page volume rushed to the top of the New York Times best-selling list. Millions of copies were sold. The prayer of Jabez could be found emblazoned upon tee-shirts, sweat shirts, coffee mugs, and notecards. Soon, a teenage version of the prayer was published, followed by a devotional version and one for small children. It seemed that everyone with whom you talked had either read or heard about the prayer of Jabez. Now, a biographical novel of the life of Jabez, written by Thom Lemmons, is available.

So, is there need for anything further to be written about Jabez and his prayer? Last July I was approached by a church leader here in the Twin Cities and was given an invitation to teach a four-week class on this prayer. I asked myself, "What can I offer that has not already been given?" Yet I consented and dedicated myself to studying the above passage during the month. The more I studied, the more God revealed to me the heart of the man Jabez. The result was not only a Sunday school class presentation but a Village School Saturday School offering as well. In the next four issues of the Philogian I would like to share with you the heart of Jabez so that you can better know his prayer.

Some of the most uninteresting passages within Scripture are those that deal with genealogies. For most of us reading them is about as exciting as watching paint dry on a hot summer's day. Now there are several reasons for this. First, these genealogies are full of names that we cannot pronounce. There sure are not many Andersons, Nelsons, Smiths, or Joneses mentioned. Second, we are becoming a people who have separated ourselves from our past. We are lax in our attendance at the cemeteries. We are careless about our own family heritage, so why should we be concerned about some long list of Bible names that mean nothing to us? So, we would hardly expect to find a blessing in a genealogy.

Yet, here in the midst of the genealogical history of the tribes of Israel, we find a man who grabs our attention. His name: Jabez. Verse 9 informs us of two things we need to know about this man if we are to properly understand his prayer.

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers

My study of this first statement about Jabez led me to ponder and reflect upon three words. The first was "brothers." I found that this Hebrew term could mean one of two people groups. It could refer to his own immediate family members, e.g. his brothers by birth, or it could refer to his extended family, namely the family of Israel, more probably the family of the tribe of Judah of which he was a member. Perhaps it is best to interpret the word as relating to both groups.

The second word was "honorable." Its basic meaning in the Hebrew is "to be heavy, weighty" and came to refer to someone who was "weighty" in society, worthy of respect and honor (see Genesis 34:19, Numbers 22:15, Isaiah 23:8-9). The reputation of an individual was of central importance if a person's life merited the receiving of honor. I found three passages in Proverbs that helped me to understand what lay behind the receiving of honor:

1. Proverbs 21:21 - He who pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity, and honor. The honorable man was one who actively pursued doing what was right in God's eyes. He also pursued love. Because the text tells us that Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, we can state with a measure of certainty that Jabez pursued those things that were right and pleasing before God and also pursued giving of love.
2. Proverbs 22:4 - Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honor and life. Two other traits of the honorable man include being humble - not thinking about yourself but looking out for the needs of others, and having the fear of the Lord - a deep sense of respect and awe of God. Again, because he was honorable, I believe Jabez modeled these aspects as well in his life.
3. Proverbs 26:1 - Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, honor is not fitting for a fool. This verse tells us what Jabez was not - a fool. Jabez was wise in his living. His priorities were honorable before God.

The third word was "was" which implied a repeated action. Jabez made being honorable something that happened everyday. He practiced being honorable...it was a way of life for him. It truly marked him as being different than his brothers. I believe it also helps us to understand the relationship that he had with his God.

I think I could liken Jabez to three other men in the Bible who had unique relationships with God. Enoch was a man unique in his time. In Genesis 5:24, in the midst of a chapter of death (the phrase "and he died" is used 8 times) we read this concerning Enoch, Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him. Then, in the very next chapter of Genesis, God described how violent and wicked the whole world had become and it grieved Him that He had made man. Thus God planned to destroy His creation, but Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8). Noah was certainly different than those of his generation. We could easily proclaim of him that he was more honorable than his brothers. Finally, there is this recorded of Job, In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil (Job 1:1). In that verse we find two of the four traits for being honorable. I would say that Jabez was in pretty good company, wouldn't you? Yes, Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. He had a heart for God and God's ways.

The birth of Jabez had been a painful experience for his mother

Jabez was named by his mother. This was the usual task for the father, although on rare occasions the mother did name the child: Eve named Cain, Hannah named Samuel, and the women friends of Naomi named Obed. Where was Jabez's father when he was born? This is a question that we can not answer conclusively because the Bible gives us no hint of an answer. Yet, I thought it fun to speculate as to the reason for his absence. Perhaps he was off to war or away with the sheep. Perhaps he had died or maybe had deserted his family for another.

His mother named him Jabez. Now this name implied "pain, sorrow." The root of this word is found in the following verses:

Genesis 45:5 (words of Joseph to his brothers as he revealed himself to them) - Now therefore be not grieved (pained), nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life.

1 Samuel 20:34 (concerning Jonathan as he approached his father concerning David) - Jonathan got up from the table in fierce anger; on that second day of the month he did not eat, because he was grieved (pained) at his father's shameful treatment of David.

Nehemiah 8:10-11 (words concerning the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem) - Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve (do not be pained) for the joy of the Lord is your strength." The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve (do not be pained)."

1 Kings 1:6 (KJV - of David relationship to his son Adonijah) - And his father (David) had not displeased (had not pained - had not disciplined) him (Adonijah) at any time saying, Why have you done so? And he also was a very goodly man; and his mother bare him after Absalom.

Psalms 139:24 (David's prayer) - And see if there by any wicked (painful) way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Why did his mother give him this most unusual name? Again the Bible does not tell us. We are only left to conjecture which might lead us to ponder some of the following possibilities:

Jabez might have been an unwanted child, just another mouth to feed.

Jabez's mother might have been depressed, experiencing a case of the post-partum blues.

Perhaps she had had a difficult pregnancy and delivery.

Might the very presence of Jabez have reminded her of a painful time with her husband.

Perhaps it was because of the burden of his name (one who caused pain) that Jabez worked harder and was more committed than others might have been. It is often when we are immersed in the realm of pain, of suffering, of difficult experiences, of trials that we learn to become all that God would desire of us.

Let me share with you, in closing, a little article that first appeared in 1977 in a publication written by Paul Evans, founder of the Haven of Rest ministry. It is titled, "Seeds Sown in Tragedy."

Seeds, as seen in nature, are among the world's most fascinating subjects. The seed of the knobcone pine is activated by tragedy or disaster. It takes a fire to release the seed of the knobcone pine. Seeds are held in the knobcone pine from fire to fire. When a blaze sweeps through the tree's habitat, heat expands the cone. The seeds are exploded into the ashes of the fire. Thus nature re-seeds the scorched land from a seed that is only activated by what appears to be a disaster. The Seed of God's Word is sometimes sown that way - in tragedy - but with long-lasting results.

Conclusion

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers...and the Lord granted him his request. God is much more interested in our hearts than in our words. I am reminded of that scene Jesus describes in Luke 18:9-14. A Pharisee entered into the temple to pray. He prayed an eloquent prayer in an eloquent way. But it was mere words because his heart was not in touch with God. On the other hand, the publican (one of those hated tax collectors) stood behind a pillar so no one could see him and prayed a very simple prayer that moved the heart of God. It was not the words but the heart of the man that moved God. I believe strongly that this was the case with Jabez as well. It was the heart of this very honorable man that touched God's heart. It is my desire that in this series of studies that we get to know Jabez's heart and ask God to make us like unto him.

JABEZ, A BLESSED MAN

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

Dr. Bruce Wilkinson's little book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, continues to be among the best selling books in America. Since the tragic events of September 11 of last year, there seems to have been a renewed interest in communicating with God and seeking God's involvement in our lives. Perhaps that is why this little prayer from a relatively obscure Bible character continues to appeal to so many.

Although, with this study we begin our examination of the prayer itself, our interest is more focused upon getting to know the heart of the man who does the praying, namely Jabez himself. This prayer certainly does not rank with many of the others prayers recorded for us in the Bible, yet God was pleased to grant Jabez his request. I am convinced God's answer had more to do with the heart intent of Jabez rather than the prayer itself.

So, welcome to another study. Our focus will be upon that first request of Jabez that God would bless him.

The Nature of Jabez Prayer

Matthew Henry, in his commentary, states that this prayer of Jabez is in the form of a vow. He writes: He does, as it were, give God a blank paper, let him write what he pleases: "Lord, if thou wilt bless me and keep me, do what thou wilt with me, I will be at thy command disposal for ever."

The Bible strongly indicates that Jabez was very passionate about his vow, about his request of God. The text proclaims that he cried out to the God of Israel. This implies a stirring that came from the deep recesses of his heart. This was not a casual request. This was not just a momentary thought. This was his longing. This was his greatest desire. This was his passion.

It seems that many times our prayers are so momentary. We are driven by the needs of the immediate. Jabez is more forward looking. Although I believe he sees his walk with God to be a day-by-day encounter, yet he also realizes that it is a long term relationship. His desire was to be blessed by God not just for the moment but for the length of the relationship.

Now, what was it for which Jabez prayed?

A Prayer for Blessing

The word "bless" is used over six hundred times in the Bible. It is an important word for us to understand. In the Old Testament, a blessing was always transmitted from the greater to the lesser. In Genesis 49, Jacob conferred a blessing upon his sons. Genesis 24:60 records Laban and Bethuel conferring a blessing upon a sister and daughter Rebekah: And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the gates of their enemies." A king could also confer a blessing upon his people. First Kings 8:14 records this of Solomon: While the whole assembly of Israel was standing there, the king turned around and blessed them.

In the Old Testament God is seen as the source of blessing. One of the functions of the Levites was to pronounce God's blessings upon the people. At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister and to pronounce blessings in his

name, as they still do today (Deuteronomy 10:8).

Again, the Old Testament relates that God can thwart a blessing given upon another that is not honoring to Him. This is what we read in Malachi 2:2: "If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name," say the Lord Almighty, "I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me."

We can conclude from these passages that a blessing is conferred upon those who are in a proper relationship with God. If I am not walking with the Lord, then I have no right to either ask God for His blessing or to expect that God would bless me. Thus, for Jabez to request Gods blessing is a mark of a man who is in a right relationship with God and is positioned to receive whatever form that blessing might take.

The Purpose of a Blessing

A blessing comes from God for His glory. The Psalmist exclaims: The Lord remembers us and will bless us; He will bless the house of Israel, he will bless the house of Aaron, he will bless those who fear the Lord small and great alike. May the Lord make you increase, both you and your children. May you be blessed by the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man. It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to silence; it is we who extol the Lord both now and forevermore. Praise the Lord (Psalm 115:12-18).

I am reminded of those precious words of encouragement from Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount. There He told His disciples: In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise (the King James translates this word glorify) your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). A blessing is not solely for my own benefit. As I receive the blessing from God, I am to respond with praise to Him. I am to give Him glory. The blessing is not an end in itself. It is only a tool to further encourage my relationship with the Father. The blessing is not given to me to promote me, but that the Father might be promoted and lifted up in my life.

When Jabez prayed that God would bless him, it was not with selfish intent. It was not Jabez saying, "God, bless me so people will appreciate me more; so my friends will respect me more." The blessing comes to us that we might decrease so He might increase (John 3:30).

But, a blessing comes to us from God for our benefit, for our encouragement. One of the great chapters from the pen of the Apostle Paul is Ephesians 1. There Paul enumerates those blessings we have received from God that we often take for granted. Included among them are: being chosen by God before the foundations of the world (just think about that blessing for a moment and see if your heart is not full of praise to God), being adopted as His sons and daughters, being redeemed and forgiven, and having received the Holy Spirit as the seal (the earnest money, the guarantee) of our future inheritance. Is it no wonder that Paul begins that great chapter with these words of praise: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (verse 3).

Finally, a blessing comes from God to flow through us for the good of others. Listen to these words from the pen of David written after he had been confronted with his sin with Bathsheba: Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit (Psalm 32:1-2). Now, what do those verses have to do with God using us to bless others. Friends, Gods blessing can only flow through a clean vessel. God will not use a dirty cup. What David is saying here is this: if I want to be a blessing to others, then I must keep the vessel free from sin.

That thought forces us to ask the question: How can a person be in the place where God can bless him or her? I believe the answer is found in Psalm 1. There I find two significant truths that help me to answer that question. First, to be a person God delights to bless, one has to be a person who delights in the Lord. His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:2). Here is a person who enjoys fellowship with Gods people. Here is a person who feasts upon Gods Word; for whom Bible study is exciting. Here is a person who is consistent in his or her life for Christ. For this person, Christ is the center around which every aspect of life revolves.

Second, to be a person God delights to bless, one has to be a person who turns away from evil. Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers (Psalm 1:1). Here is a person who has his or her priorities properly aligned. Here is a person who daily practices choosing to serve righteousness rather than sin (Romans 6:11-14).

Conclusion

Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh that you would bless me and the Lord granted him his request. Jabez was aware of how God had blessed him in the past. And Jabez was aware of his relationship with God. Those thoughts propelled him to ask God for further blessings, not to advance the image of Jabez, but to impact others for the glory of God.

Allow me to challenge you to sit down and write out some of the many blessings you have received from God just today. Then ask yourself this question: If I were to be sold bold as Jabez and ask God for His blessings, what should I ask of God? Friends, how do you want God to bless you? Finally, close your time with a moment of prayer praising God for the blessings you have received and for those you expect to receive in the future.

JABEZ, A CHALLENGED MAN

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, I gave birth to him in pain. Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain. And God granted his request. (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

This little prayer, couched in a section of genealogical records, continues to encourage and teach me the value of a praying heart. This prayer is not a formula to entice God to do for you whatever you wish. It is not a Christian mantra forcing the hand of God to act on your behalf with blessing after blessing. Yet, this has been the reaction of the world, and even of many believers, to this prayer. Some have called and related something like this to me, Max, I have been praying the Prayer of Jabez, and Wow! Has God ever been good to me! My first response is to ask something like this: Did God hear and honor only your words, or did God listen to the desires of your heart?

As I stated in our last study, I am convinced Gods granting Jabez his request had more to do with the heart intent of Jabez rather than the prayer itself. He had first asked for God to bless him. This was not asked with selfish motivation, but rather that God might be pleased to touch others through his own life. Jabez wanted to be a channel of blessing. And God granted him his request.

Now we turn to the second petition of Jabez in his prayer: asking for an enlarged territory.

An Introduction

Many years ago, I had the privilege of hearing Dr. Warren Wiersbe, who at the time was pastoring Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, preach on the prayer of Jabez. It was to a large conference of pastors. Dr. Wiersbe made a statement that I have never forgotten: The Christian begins on a narrow way but does not continue with a narrow life. I found that to be a challenging phrase. He continued: Those who experience the narrow life are the sinners, for they are limited. He cited the following as examples:

For the alcoholic happiness in life can only come from a bottle

For the gambler happiness can only come at the track or at the card tables

For the drug abuser happiness can only come from another pill or injection

But for the believer, happiness can be experienced by:

Hearing the song of a robin on a bright sunny Spring morning

Seeing the deep red in a tender rose bud

Observing the laughter of children at play

Singing the great hymns and songs of praise to the Lord

Sharing a meal with family and friends

Receiving a letter or e-mail from a loved one

As I have reflected over the years on what Dr. Wiersbe had said, I have come to realize the significance of those words of Jesus in John 10:10, I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

For What Was Jabez Asking?

The phrase to enlarge comes from the Hebrew root meaning to multiply. It is used in Job 29:18 with the meaning to live long: Then I said, I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the sand. (KJV) It also has the meaning of to brag: To his sin he adds rebellion; scornfully he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God (Job 34:37). Finally, it can mean to have many children: According to their family genealogy, they had 36,000 men ready for battle, for they had many wives and children (1 Chronicles 7:4).

Friends, this is a petition for growth. Now growth comes as a result of being faithful to God. And the reward for faithfulness is more responsibility. You will remember the story Jesus told in Luke 19:11-18 of the nobleman who left his estate to receive a high honor. While he was gone, he entrusted his affairs to his servants, giving a portion of the estate to each one. Upon his return, he demanded an accounting from his servants. One servant had increased his gift tenfold, while yet another had increased his fivefold. How did the nobleman reward the faithfulness of these servants? Was it by giving them an extra week of vacation? Was it by giving them early retirement? Absolutely not! Listen to the words of Jesus, Well done, my good servant! his master replied. Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities. The reward for being faithful was more responsibility.

I believe Jabez is praying, Lord, I have been faithful in what You have entrusted to me. Lord, I am not content with the status quo. I want to grow.

How Does God Enlarge Our Territories?

Again, I believe a word study will help us to significantly understand how God often causes us to grow, expanding and multiplying our territories.

We can be stretched by our troubles. From the pen of David we read these words: The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish (Psalm 25:17). James records a similar thought when he writes: Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing (can we say, the enlargement) of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4).

One of our Village School graduates, Larry Julian, has written a book titled, God Is My CEO (published by Adams Media Corporation, 2001). The book features the testimonies of some outstanding Christian leaders in the world of business today. As I thought about this portion of the prayer of Jabez Oh that you would enlarge my territory I was drawn to the closing portion of an interview Larry had with Jim Secord. I share it with you because I believe it captures the real essence of Jabez heart.

As Jim and I were wrapping up our discussion, a conversation ensued that showed how prophetic his final comments about preparing for gut-wrenching change really were. As we prepared to end the interview, I glanced at the beautiful bouquet of flowers on Jims desk. Where did you get the flowers? I asked. Jim smiled as he explained, Oh, theyre from my wife, DArCy. She always does things like that. Jim then shared with me that DArCy, at the age of 58, is battling Alzheimers disease.

In everyones life we come to forks in the road. Its not something we want, but its there. Were then faced with decisions. I could get the best care for DArCy and go on with my job. Instead, I have elected to leave the company to be with her. I want to be in a new relationship with her; a new way to love. I havent figured all the ways to do that, but I will do it and we will walk this journey together. DArCy may not understand the same kind of journey when I communicate with her. I may not be speaking to her cognitive mind, but I will be talking to her spiritually. I really believe that God has a purpose in this. DArCy is giving to me and to others in her own special way and I am trying to find out what that is. Also, this is my opportunity to give in a whole new way.

Even though Jim has been with the company for 37 years, he says the decision to leave was easy. I see this situation as a pretty amazing gift, he says. Once again, I find myself facing uncertainty. In the case of DArCy, this situation is much more uncertain than the trauma of the three changes in company ownership. I always felt we would pull through and have a positive outcome with the company changes. With DArCy, I feel like I am going into completely uncharted waters. Its extremely tough, yet I firmly believe this will turn into a potentially magnificent journey.

Friends, an enlarged territory may not always be a glamorous thing. Jim Secords territory certainly was enlarged and through it God will bring blessings. So, when we pray, let us not have a preconceived idea of how God will enlarge our territory. We just might be enlarged in a way we had not anticipated.

We can also be stretched through times of distress. Again, listen to these words from David: Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness: you have enlarged me when I was in distress; have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer (Psalm 4:1). Dont we find that when we face difficulties, God becomes more precious to us and our lives are strengthened? I think of the Apostle Paul who wrote these words: But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christs power may rest on me. That is why, for Christs sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 11:9-10).

God also enlarges us as He enlarges our place of ministry. David declared: He brought me forth also into a large place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me (Psalm 18:19). As we walk closer to God, He gives us greater opportunities to serve Him. One can only think of Daniel as an example of those who walked with God and how God gave him greater opportunities to serve Him in Babylon. Perhaps no one has served in government as faithfully as did Daniel, yet the Bible makes it clear that it was never easy for him just remember the lions den.

Finally, I read these words in Psalm 18:36: You have enlarged my steps under me, that my feet did not slip. God enables us to take large steps. One thinks of

Joseph. He began in a very narrow place a pit facing the realities of death. He ended in a very large place a throne in Egypt receiving the praises of many, including those who wished his death.

A Conclusion

God stretches us with change. Now change is never comfortable because with change we lose some of the control we have had in the past. But God does not want us to be in control. He wants to be in control. I think Jabez is saying, God, challenge me. Stretch my life. Yes, use even change to make my life more productive. This was to be done, not that Jabez might be glorified and honored, but that all glory might belong to God. It was not, Stretch me so people will say, when I walk down the street, There goes Jabez, one of the most significant people in Israel. Instead it is Stretch me so people will be caused to glorify God.

I close with these words of Jesus, found in the Sermon on the Mount: In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Allow me to challenge you to sit down and reflect upon the following questions: If God were to enlarge my territory this year, what might happen? How might God change my world? How would I respond to any changes God might bring into my life to enlarge my walk with Him?

JABEZ, A COMMITTED MAN

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, I gave birth to him in pain. Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain. And God granted his request. (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

Although no longer at the top of the best-seller charts, the little volume by Dr. Bruce Wilkinson still remains among the most popular books being purchased today. It is still being marketed in many different forms, from a version for children to another for teens. This may become the best selling book of all time focusing on the matter of prayer. Why is this?

I believe it has something to do with the simplicity of Jabez's prayer. It was very short something that appeals in our fast-paced society. It also appears to be rather vague in its requests again, something that appeals to our lets be broad-based, not too specific society. The prayer also comes from a person who seems to be disadvantaged, one who either has or is experiencing difficulties in his life with that, most of us can identify. Finally, and probably more important than the above, the prayer worked, for the text tells us that God granted his request. We are all looking for something that works.

So, this prayer has become a model for us. And our expectations are that God will grant our requests because we have prayed Jabez's prayer. But, as we have been noticing, the secret to Jabez's prayer is his heart. And that is what we need to value today. How is my heart's relationship to God?

In our previous articles we have examined the first two petitions of Jabez. He first asked for God's blessing, that God might be pleased to touch others using Jabez as the channel of blessing. His second request was for an enlarged territory, that God would cause him to grow. As we discovered, this enlargement may not always be realized in a manner that we would deem acceptable.

In this final study, our attention will be turned to the last two petitions of Jabez: a desire for God's hand to be upon him, and a request that he be kept from pain.

A Prayer for Enablement

Jabez prayed, Let your hand be with me. He wanted to know that God was with him. Oh, to be aware of the presence of God. David was aware of the presence of God as he went out to challenge Goliath. David said to the Philistine, You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands (1 Samuel 17:45-47). Knowing that God was with him enabled David to march confidently out to face the giant. A nine-foot giant was no problem to God and, therefore, no problem for David. "Let your hand be with me, Lord, as I face giant problems today."

Daniel was aware of the presence of God as he was cast into the lions den. Listen to his testimony to the King the following morning: Daniel answered, O king, live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king (Daniel 6:22). With God's presence, those fierce lions became like tame housecats. One might picture Daniel even curled up lying upon their manes. Lions were no problem to God and, therefore no problem for Daniel. "Let your hand be with me, Lord, as I face fierce pressures that desire to consume me."

Moses knew the value of the presence of the Lord, for we read these words in Exodus 33:15, Then Moses said to him, If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth? Israel was encamped on the plains surrounding Mount Sinai. Aaron, in Moses' absence, had led Israel in creating and then worshipping a golden calf. God was incensed and desired to destroy the people, but relented upon the intercession of Moses. Now Moses wanted the assurance that God would go forward with them as He had done in the past. It was as if Moses were saying, God, if You don't go with us, then we will not go either, for we don't know the way. "Let your hand be with me, Lord, as I don't know the way you have prepared for me."

Joshua was faced with the threat of God's presence being removed because the sin of Achan had caused the people of Israel to become displeasing in His sight. Listen to these words of God to Joshua there on the victory slopes of Jericho, That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction. (Joshua 7:12). Oh, the disasters that befall our lives when our sinful disobedience causes the presence of God to be so greatly diminished. Defeat, discouragement, and despair replace victory, encouragement, and peace when God's presence is removed. "Let your hand be with me, Lord, so I will be kept from defeat."

I believe that Jabez understood that nothing of significance would be accomplished through his life without the daily presence of God being manifest. Neither will our lives accomplish anything of significance for God unless He is present. Let your hand be with is a powerful aspect of the prayer of commitment.

A Prayer of Surrender of Self

Jabez's final request is this: and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain. The Hebrew word translated keep can portray the thought of the active involvement of God in history. God is not only transcendent, but also immanent in history. God accomplishes His sovereign purposes through history.

But the word can also be used to describe an ethical response to God translated into obedience to what He has said. Leviticus 19:37 advocates, Keep all my decrees and all my laws and follow them. I am the Lord. We read a similar thought in Deuteronomy 6:18, Do what is right and good in the Lord's sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land that the Lord promised on oath to your forefathers. By using this word keep it seems that Jabez is acknowledging that he has a responsibility to act upon what he already knows is God's will.

The word translated harm in the NIV is the Hebrew word usually translated evil. It denotes an unethical or immoral activity against other people. A person could commit evil through his speech. Whenever one comes to see me, he speaks falsely, while his heart gathers slander; then he goes out and spreads it abroad thus records the psalmist in Psalm 41:6. The psalmist also utters this plea in Psalm 109:20, May this be the Lords payment to my accusers, to those who speak evil of me. I hear Jabez praying, "Lord, guard my lips so that I will not commit evil with my words."

If only we would take the time to pray this more sincerely more often, how different our relationships might become in the absence of hurtful words.

A person could also commit evil through his actions. Micah relates this truth with these words, Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At mornings light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. Both hands are skilled in doing evil; the ruler demands gifts, the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire they all conspire together (Micah 2:1; 7:3). Again, I hear Jabez praying, "Lord, guard my hands and feet so that I will not be involved in evil deeds."

Now, what I find very curious about this petition is that the word evil is from the same Hebrew root from which we get the name Jabez. It is almost as if Jabez is asking God to keep Jabez from Jabez. I think we all would acknowledge that the most important person we ever had to deal with concerning sin is ourselves. That is why Paul constantly admonished his readers to yield themselves to God, to present their bodies as sacrifices to God.

With this petition, I believe Jabez is acknowledging his responsibility for the choices he makes of his words and his actions. To commit evil or not to commit evil that decision was Jabez's. To be free from evil takes a radical action on a persons part. The following verses aptly declare that truth:

Psalm 34:14 Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

Psalm 37:27 Turn from evil and do good; then you will always live securely.

Proverbs 3:7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.

Amos 5:14-15 Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.

Zechariah 1:4 Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: This is what the Lord Almighty says, Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices. But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the Lord.

A Conclusion

And God granted his request. What a singularly significant statement that closes the comments on the prayer of Jabez! It is a statement each one of us would desire to hear from God for our prayers. Let me reiterate a statement I made in our first lesson in this series. The secret to Jabez's prayer lies in his heart. He had a heart that was rightly related to God. His desire was Gods desire. He desired blessings so that he might, in turn, bless others. He desired to have his borders enlarged again, so that he might grow in his relationship with God and impact others. He desired to have Gods hand upon him because he knew that without His presence his life would have little significance upon others. And He desired to be kept from evil, even from himself so that his life, freed from the evil of hurtful words and harmful actions, might influence others.

There is certainly nothing selfishly expressed in this prayer. I think we would be hard pressed to say Jabez was self-centered. God granted him his request because he was focused upon God and desired to influence others. And, those kinds of prayers God is pleased to grant.

I am thankful for Dr. Wilkinsons little book. And I trust this brief series has caused you to consider the heart of Jabez as well as his prayer. Then we can become more powerful in our own praying.