

The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life.
By Bruce Wilkerson. Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 93 Pages.

His mom didn't exactly celebrate his birth! She named him *pain*, or *Jabez* in Hebrew, a moniker he carried with him the rest of his life. As an adult, and apparently as he was about to enter an important mission, Jabez cries out to God asking for three things which the text (I Chron. 4: 9,10) tells us God granted. These requests were (1) that God would bless him by enlarging his territory (pasture), and (2) that God's hand would be with him, another way of wanting to experience God's power and protection, and (3) that he would be free from pain (also, grief or sorrow.) In other words, he may have been asking to escape this negative reputation which he had from birth!

The story of Jabez is hidden away in one of the most obscure books of the Old Testament where the author lists endless genealogies of His people beginning with Adam. Occasionally he stops to give a short vignette of someone, as he does here with Jabez, a man who merits two verses and 35 words in the original Hebrew.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF HIS BIRTH

The text only informs us that because he caused his mother pain at his birth she called him *Jabez* (pain), assuredly not good for the child's self-image! Since we are informed that he had brothers, and she had given birth before, I find his naming unusual. Were not these other births painful as well? What may shed some light on the situation is the Hebrew word for pain, which can also mean metaphysical pain such as *grief*, *sorrow*, or maybe even *shame*. I rather suspect there is more to the birth and naming of Jabez than just physical pain. Was there something not quite legitimate about his birth that caused his mother great shame and sorrow? Was it immorality on her part, or rape? We can only surmise, but the pain and sorrow must have hung over both mother and child.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF HIS PRAYER

It's almost a certainty that there is a connection between his prayer and the circumstances of his birth due to the last part of his request which seems to be a petition to remove the stigma that hung over him.

The first part of the request has to do with enlarging his territory (See Ex. 34:24 and Dt. 12:20). One commentator, (Jamieson, Fausett and Brown) believes this request may be tied to God's command to rid the land of the Canaanites. They write: "*The prayer...seems to have been uttered when he was entering on an important or critical service, for the successful execution of which he placed confidence neither on his own nor his people's prowess, but looked anxiously for the aid and blessing of God. The enterprise was in all probability the expulsion of the Canaanites from the territory he occupied, and as this was a war of extermination, which God himself had commanded... .*" Thus the second request was for the protection and ability to carry

out God's command. The third part of the prayer may be something like: "Lord help me to accomplish this task so that in the sight of my family and community this stigma (whatever it was) might be removed." I know it's purely conjecture, but it may be that his mother was raped by a--gulp, Canaanite! This is not unreasonable. He is praying that God will enable him to carry out God's command of getting rid of the Canaanites. This would immediately help his standing if he were a half-breed. It would also help him and his family. Being a bastard child he would not have an inheritance, and by enlarging his territory he could sustain a larger flock.

Whatever the circumstances, the inspired account tells us he was more honorable than his brothers (who may have been too terrified to take on the Canaanites), and God, pleased with his prayer, because it showed great faith and dependence, granted his request. (Note: There is a great deal of similarity between the prayer of Jabez and the prayer of Jacob in Gen. 28:20ff.)

Thanks to the best-selling (in the millions) book by Bruce Wilkerson most everyone in Christendom has now heard of Jabez. For the last 20 or more years *The Prayer of Jabez* circulated as a sermon on cassette tape. The success of the book has surprised everyone, publisher and author included. Mr. Wilkerson is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, and currently, president of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries.

The book's success cannot be directly attributable to its reviews, which I found by-and-large to be pretty negative. Wilkerson, in this book is charged with preaching *prosperity gospel*, making God a *celestial slot machine*, *making prayer a mantra*, etc. Some of these reviews drip with sarcasm, veiled jealousy, and charges of theological heresy. Frankly, some of the reviews were so poor one had doubts if the reviewer closely analyzed the book. Briefly I would like to answer some these charges.

IT TEACHES THAT PRAYER IS A MANTRA

No where in the book does Wilkerson say that a prayer should be mindlessly chanted as some magical formula as in eastern religions. He does say the prayer should be repeated. What can be wrong with this if the mind is engaged and one is really trusting in God for the outcome? Doesn't Jesus teach us to be persistent in prayer (Matt. 7:7. The original says "Keep asking." See also, Lk. 18:1-8)

IT TEACHES HEALTH AND WEALTH GOSPEL

Nowhere does this book teach that simply by repeating these two verses one will be successful or accumulate wealth. What it does teach, is that people should pray as Jabez did for God to accomplish through them things they could not ordinarily accomplish in their own strength. The author gives several personal illustrations where he set ministry goals (the Jamaica mission) that he knew seemed impossible. Then he prayed that God would accomplish them. In other words, he prayed that God would *enlarge his borders*. The point is, that by praying for something we know cannot be accomplished in human strength, we are exercising faith. It is this that pleases God, and it was what caused God to proclaim: Jabez "*was more honorable than his brothers.*"

THE EMPHASIS IS SELFISH

While I can certainly see how this may be misconstrued in the book, I do not believe this is the emphasis. We are always to pray in God's will knowing that He is sovereign. Nevertheless, it is not unbiblical to pray for God's blessing. If this is not the case we would have to eliminate many of the Psalms!

CONCLUSION

The critics have over-reacted to this book. It's a sermon; it's not a full-blown theology of prayer! I wish that some of the wording in the book were different, and I disagree some on the exegesis of the passage, particularly the last part about protection from evil. I wish in future additions the publisher would add a disclaimer noting that the prayer is meant for believers, and then spell out briefly what is meant by that.

In short, there is nothing wrong with praying the prayers of the Bible as long as we are aware of the original context and situation. It must be by application, that is why we began this review with an attempt at finding out the historical situation and original meaning. *Jabez may have needed a larger pasture to feed his family.* Hence, today it is not wrong to ask God to enlarge your dwelling if the size of your family warrants it. And if you need more income to support your family please do petition the God who has promised to supply all our needs. It is not wrong to ask God to bless your ministry or that God will grant success in business. If you desire a new Cadillac feel free to ask God. If He doesn't want you to have it he won't give it. The point is to pray for God's will, and always that He will be glorified. If your request for a Cadillac is for the wrong motive the Holy Spirit will convict you, and you can revise your prayer (It happens to me all the time!). I really do believe that God delights in us, and does want to bless us, not only spiritually, but at times materially. We must also remember that He is God, and sometimes He will not remove the thorn because He has a greater and wiser purpose.

Pray the prayer of Jabez in the spirit of Jabez and watch God do above and beyond what we could ever ask or think. Jabez is an outstanding example of a man taking God at His word. He acted on his faith by asking God to help him fulfill His plan (driving out the Canaanites) for him even though he had some kind of a disadvantage.

"Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed!... I recommend it as a prayer for each one of you, dear brethren and sisters; one which will be available at all times; a prayer to begin Christian life with, a prayer to end it with, a prayer which would always be appropriate in your joys or in your sorrows." Who said this? Why none other than the great preacher, C.H. Spurgeon! To read the rest of his sermon on Jabez you can find it here on the web:
www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0994.htm.

For good sources on the theology and practice of prayer see:

Bounds, E.M. *The Complete Works of E.M. Bounds on Prayer.*

Hallesby, O. *Prayer.*

Keller, Timothy. *Prayer.*

Spear, Wayne R. *The Theology of Prayer*.
Sproul, R.C. *Effective Prayer*.
Storms, C. Samuel. *Reaching God's Ear*.
Thornbury, John. *Help Us to Pray*.