



The Cud...a little something to chew on.

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We Can Do Better Than the Prayer of Jabez

The first time someone asked my opinion about the prayer of Jabez, I got caught with my biblical pants down. I'd never heard of Jabez, or his prayer. In my own defense, Jabez wasn't someone you'd call a headliner in the Scriptures. The man's whole life is covered in two verses – that's two out of 31,173. Jabez was the equivalent of a movie extra, with just enough lines to get a union card but not much else. Which makes his fifteen minutes of fame all the more puzzling.

There's a book currently topping the bestseller list devoted solely to Jabez and his prayer. I haven't read the book, so I won't comment on it. But the prayer itself is in the public domain, so I consider it fair game for critique.

Here's the prayer in its entirety: "Now Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, 'Oh that You would bless me indeed and enlarge my border, and that Your hand might be with me, and that You would keep me from harm that it may not pain me!' And God granted him what he requested" (1 Chronicles 4:10).

On the surface, it's not what you'd call a hallmark supplication.

Frankly, I hesitate to write about this, or any prayer. Prayer is mostly a mystery to me, and I certainly don't do enough of it to be an expert. Jesus Christ gave His life to purchase our pass to the throne of grace, and I'm not about to try and regulate the transactions believers conduct there. As long as we can accept "no" as an answer to our prayers, we have enormous freedom in what we ask for. And if the prayer of Jabez puts you in a praying mind – pray on. I'm sure it's better to seek the Lord with any prayer, than to brush Him off in unbelief and indifference.

But people keep asking me about this particular prayer, and now that I've located it, I'd at least like to make a few observations. Who knows when I'll find it again.

Perhaps the most appealing thing about Jabez's prayer is that God actually said, "yes" to his request. It's appealing, but potentially misleading. What God grants is not always the same as what God delights in. When the Israelites protested their high carb diet in the wilderness, God gave them their request for protein but sent "leanness to their souls" (Psalm 106:13-15; Numbers 11).

The law of unintended consequences was clearly in play for the bellyaching Israelites, since no matter how good the main dish, a lean soul is a dietary disaster. So keep in mind, when God granted Jabez his request, He wasn't necessarily validating the wisdom of the request, nor confirming His pleasure in the granting of it – for Jabez, or for those imitating him.

But let's assume for a moment that God said "yes" to Jabez because He was pleased with the request. It doesn't necessarily follow that by making Jabez's prayer request my own, that God will be equally pleased with me. Or that Jabez and I would profit from the same outcome. One person's blessing can be another person's curse. What's good for Jabez may spell calamity for me. The Scriptures are filled with the caution: Be careful what you ask for.

Careful what we ask for, but not altogether fearful. Our Lord Jesus taught that God is like a good parent who, when His child asks for a sandwich, will not throw him a stone (Matthew 7:7-11). I like to believe the reverse is also true, that if I ask God for a stone but *think* I'm asking for a sandwich, God will give me the sandwich I need, instead of the stone I asked for. God is good that way.

But didn't I just say that we should be careful what we ask for because we might get it? Scriptures indicate that too. As I said, prayer is mysterious.

Perhaps the worst conclusion we can draw from Jabez is that there was something inherent in his request that made God grant it. There's no such thing as an effective prayer "formula". God is not a great genie waiting for us to rub Him the right way in order to get what we want.

In fact, if we're thinking clearly, we will never pray to get what we want. That's like asking for the inmates to run the asylum. What we *want* is rarely synonymous with what we *need*. And considering God has the omniscient edge on knowing what we need, it's just common sense to pray for His will over ours. Even the Lord Jesus defaulted to the Father when in the Garden He conceded, "But not my will, Thine be done" (Matthew 26:39-42).

I don't see a problem with Jabez as an *example* of prayer, but I wouldn't make him the *model* for prayer. There are better models in the New Testament. Consider a few reasons why:

Jabez was limited in prayer by what he did and didn't know about the plan of God. As a Jew under the Old Covenant, Jabez had less revelation and different expectations than those of us living under the New Covenant. Those limitations made an enormous difference in how and what he prayed for. And while Christians can learn from those living under the Old Covenant (Romans 15:4), we should always factor in their limitations.

Jabez was not only limited by his times and his covenant, he himself is an enigma. We have no idea how Jabez sized up in God's eyes. There is no commentary in Scripture regarding the man's standing with God. We only know that he outshined his brothers in honor, and for some reason his mother thought he was a pain (I'm not trying to be cute, his mother gave him a name that means, literally, "pain").

It's risky business to extract an obscure individual from the pages of biblical history and make him an example, simply because God granted his prayer request. If you're looking for a prayer model, it's safer to focus on the examples left by the Son of God and His Apostles.

The Lord Jesus taught on prayer, *and* He left us a model for prayer. Ironically, the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and the prayer of Jabez bear little resemblance. Jabez asked God for more real estate, a divine bodyguard, and insulation from pain. Jesus asked God for His Kingdom to come, His will to be done, the day's meals, and forgiveness from God equal to the forgiveness we offer others. And the deliverance Jesus told us to seek, was deliverance from testing that could lead to temptation. Of course we're free to ask beyond the Lord's Prayer, but it should function as our "home page".

As far as content goes, our prayers *to* God should always be informed by the revelation we have *from* God. For example, under the Old Covenant, God promised Israel they could expect His blessing to be manifested materially – fertile land, conquered enemies, safe borders and high profit margins. Israel's prayers were, appropriately, a reflection of their expectations.

Under the New Covenant, Jesus promised His followers that they could expect nothing beyond His own experience, namely, homelessness, hatred and hurt (John 15:18-20; Matthew 8:19-21). Happily, most of us are doing much better than Jesus. But the point is, we cannot *expect* better than Jesus. And our prayers should reflect an eternal hope over a temporal one (1 Corinthians 15:19; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Instead of praying for my enemy's destruction, I pray for my enemy, period. Instead of praying for prosperity, I pray for perseverance. Jabez prayed for roots in the world, I pray for release from the world.

Allow me to repeat something I said at the outset: If pondering the prayer of Jabez prompts you to hit your knees, then by all means ponder and pray. But bear in mind that when it comes to “asking according to His will” (1 John 5:14), there, Jabez lets us down.

For that day,

David

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