

GREAT OLD TESTAMENT PRAYERS: JABEZ

(1 Chronicles 4.9-10)

Introduction

In the year 2000, a man called Bruce Wilkinson found an obscure character in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 and turned him into an international superstar with his 80-page book, *The Prayer of Jabez*.

It became a worldwide phenomenon, selling 10 million copies and rising to number one on the New York Times Bestseller list.

And yet even if you know your Bible well there's a good chance you have never heard of Jabez. He is tucked away, like a needle in a haystack, in first 11 chapters of 1 Chronicles, most of which is a list of names.

The Legacy of Pain

"What a pain!" Have you ever said that about anyone? Has anyone ever said it about you? It was said about Jabez. It's what his name means. Jabez: one who has brought me pain.

You'd want to change it wouldn't you? Some people do change their names. I'm going to read out some original names of famous people that were later changed by deed poll. See if you can guess who they are. Harry Webb (Cliff Richard). Marian Morrison (John Wayne). Daryl Walters (Enid Blyton). Grigori Yefimovich (Rasputin). Maurice Micklewhite (Michael Caine).

I was present at the birth of all four of our children. Three out of four arrived after long, arduous, exhausting and painfully sore labour. I had to go and have a good lie down afterwards, the agony quite wore me out!

Kathie went through pain but she didn't take it out on the kids by naming them Ache, Pain, Agony and Ordeal. She remembers that childbirth was a difficult experience but she's moved on.

But when Jabez' mother delivered her son in great pain she never let him forget it. When she named him she wanted him – and everyone else to know - that he was a massive inconvenience to her in the delivery suite.

I have known parents talking aloud, in front of their children, about all the disappointments they have felt with their children, all their shortcomings, all their inadequacies and the grief it has caused them. It's embarrassing, it's awkward, you *feel* for the child who's dying a thousand deaths, looking down in shame. In modern terms, maybe you would say that Jabez came from a dysfunctional family, with a complaining and controlling mother who inflicted guilt on her children.

But in spite of his unpromising start in life, Jabez overcame the setbacks created in his childhood. The Bible says that he was honourable - more honourable than the rest of his family and the key to his overcoming his unhappy childhood is the prayer he prayed. That was his secret. As someone has said, "The secret of Christianity is Christianity in secret."

Before we break the prayer down I need to say that it's not a magic formula. That's maybe the issue I'd have with Bruce Wilkinson's book. The back cover says "One simple daily prayer can help you leave the past behind and break through to the extravagantly blessed life you were meant to live."

The Bible says "Jabez *cried out* to the God of Israel." It was his impassioned expression of trust in God that grew out of his real relationship with him. Jabez poured out his soul with feeling, with fire, with faith, born out of the heartache of his humiliation. And God has recorded his prayer in Scripture for all time, so there are things we can glean here.

1) "Oh, that you would bless me"

Firstly, Jabez asks for God's blessing on his life. Like the young lad called James who prayed "Lord, my name is Jimmy and I'm up for all you wanna gimme."

I meet quite a few people who ask if it's OK to pray for their own needs. They feel quite comfortable praying for others but feel it's selfish to pray for themselves. Jabez wasn't worried about that, he wanted the best that God has and he believed that God wanted to give it to him.

Jabez knew that God had said to his ancestor Abraham, "I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."

So Jabez asks for blessing so he could in turn be a blessing to others. Our purpose as God's people, the Church, is to be a blessing to the world – but we have nothing of value to offer the world if we ourselves have not been blessed first.

Are you ever tempted to say "Well, whatever, if God blesses me that's great but if not I'm fine"? Compare that attitude with the passion in Jabez' prayer as he cried out, "Oh, that you would bless me!"

Ask God for new blessing on your life. Go on, ask! Pray that he will light a fire in your soul. Pray for a flowing in of favour, a profusion of provision, a brimming over of blessing, the measure of which is too great to contain and which spills over to enrich the lives of others.

2) And enlarge my territory!

Jabez also prays that God would extend his territory, meaning his family would have more land to live in and that his life of faith would have a greater reach. Have you ever asked God for something so big that you could not possibly achieve it by yourself, it would have to be God? Ask God to enlarge your sphere of influence.

Look at your circumstances. Take a good look at everything that's going on in your life. Now look up and beyond! It is a good thing to ask God to enlarge your territory.

3) Let your hand be with me

The third thing Jabez asks God for is that God's hand will be with him. As a small boy I used to love holding my dad's hand. It was a secure place and I felt loved.

But comfort and security is not what the hand of the Lord means in the Bible. It means his power and might in the lives of his people. It says in Joshua 4 that God dried up the Red Sea "so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the *hand of the Lord* is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God." It says in Acts 11 that "*the hand of the Lord* was with them and a great number believed and turned to the Lord."

Ask God that his hand will be on your life so that you can accomplish something great for him. Something so remarkable that when it comes to pass, everyone will have to say, "that could only have been the hand of God."

4) And keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.

The fourth and final part of Jabez' prayer is that God would keep him from harm so that he would be free from pain. His mother thought Jabez was a pain. Being labelled a pain caused him pain in turn and no doubt he will have caused pain in turn. Because hurt people - hurt people. We've got a vicious cycle here.

But his prayer is that God will step in and answer his cry so all that will stop. It was time to reverse the curse. It was time to sever every unhealthy, spiritual tie. He did not want to cause any more pain. He wanted his life to be a blessing, not a byword for misery.

And God granted his request.

But 1 Chronicles 4.9-10 is not so much about Jabez as about his God. It's about the supreme, faithful, wise and gracious God who heard Jabez'

prayer and answered it. The Bible says, very simply, "And God granted his request." Remember – God hears prayer and answers it.

Some say that prayer is all in the mind,
That the only result is the solace we find,
That God does not answer, nor hear, when we call;
We commune with our own hearts in prayer – that is all.
But we who have knelt with our burden and care
And have made all our problems a matter of prayer
Have seen God reach down from heaven above;
Move mountains, touch hearts in his infinite love.
We know that God works in a wonderful way
On behalf of his children who trust him and pray.

And the message of this prayer is good news for every believer, not just Jabez: because God is still in the business of blessing, of enlarging territory, of extending his hand of favour and of keeping from harm those who ask.

Ending

So often in the Bible people are named by their experience or the experience of others. Isaac means 'laughter' because when he was born, Abraham and Sarah laughed again after *years* of shame and sorrow.

Jesus renamed Simon (which means 'reed') Peter (which means 'rock'). Jesus takes a man called Weedy and calls him Rocky.

Jesus himself means 'saviour'. "That's what you are to call him," the angel said, "because he will save his people from their sins."

Our daughter Anna was born on Good Friday and so her name means 'grace'.

Jabez' mother couldn't forget the trauma he put her through and she took it out on him. Are you labelled by experiences in your past? How many of the following can you tick off in your mind?

- I'm no good to God
- I'm not very bright
- I'm divorced
- I'll never amount to much
- I failed my children
- I'm ugly
- I'm weak

I can still hear in my mind the exasperated voices of the Irish nuns who educated me. "John Lambert, three out of ten, hopeless!" But with God we do not need to let the experiences of our lives define us.

The Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3 "One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize." It's funny, he says "one thing I do" but then he lists two things. He says 1) I forget what is behind *and* 2) I press on toward the goal.

Maybe he says "one thing" because in order to go forward, you've got to leave the past behind. You can't move on and advance in life if you're still carrying resentments and pain and are still looking back. Forget the pain of the past; just let it go!

And the Bible tells us that Jabez was more honourable because he refused to allow his name and his label to define him. "All right, so my parents called me pain" he said. "But God calls me to blessing and enlargement, and favour and to be free."

No matter what people have said about you, what has your Father said about you?

The truth about you is that you are a child of God, adopted by grace, you are the apple of his eye, you are a new creation – and your past doesn't determine your future, provided you live in the name God has given you and *not* the name experience has labelled you with.

Jabez started out in life as a messed up person. But as Homer Simpson says "The Bible is full of messed up people – except this one guy..."

Mary gave birth to Jesus in pain but think of the blessing he was to others...

He was a man of sorrows, rejected by others. The cross is all about pain. The ugliness of my sin caused Jesus excruciating pain. His body was filthy from the cell where he was kept. He was stripped naked and the flesh on his back was lacerated by whips. There were deep bruises from the beatings he endured. He had spit running down his face. The crown of thorns caused a river of blood to stream down his face. He took upon him the crushing weight of the sin of the whole world it tore him out of his Father's presence.

But on the third day he rose again and triumphed over death. That's how he has made it possible for your pain to be the seedbed of his blessing.

Jabez was more honourable 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.

Let's pray...