

1 Chr 4:9-10.

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, {[9] Jabez sounds like the Hebrew for pain.} saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." 10 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.

Sometimes in the OT, we come across little gems hidden amongst what seems like some fairly unpromising material. 1 Chronicles begins with chapter after chapter of genealogies from Adam to Abraham as descendants and parentage are recorded. The first comment anybody is this short comment on Jabez, whose fame consists entirely because of what he prayed and today, we will be looking at why God blessed him.

The word "Jabez" sounds like the Hebrew word for pain and seems to indicate that whilst all childbirth is painful and especially in those days before modern medicine, this birth seemed to be unusually painful. It is a bit like a person today having "Pain" or "Agony" as their Christian name! Imagine being called "pain" at school, amongst friends, by your family, etc!

People, after they had stopped laughing, would have asked "Young man, what was your mother thinking?" It is hard to imagine a more inauspicious start for someone's life, constantly the butt of jokes. But this man's sincere prayer caught God's ear and was answered. You might think that that is God's job to grant answers to prayer but as an exercise one day, you might like to go through a concordance and find out how many times, God is recorded as granting an answer to prayer.

This prayer sounds so straight-forward, even selfish, but some investigation on exactly what Jabez is praying for will show some interesting conclusions. First of all, Jabez cried out to the God of Israel. This was no mere recitation of a formula but a direct, passionate request to God. It reminds of the fictional story of a person who went into a church where people were praying and their prayers were portrayed in the form of birds. Some prayers never got beyond the ceiling because of sin in the person's life whilst other prayers took the form of stuffed birds sitting beside the people: the theology was perfect but they did not mean a syllable of it. Others, not as elegantly expressed possibly, but certainly heartfelt, went straight to God's heart and were

answered. Jabez, possibly the butt of endless jokes, had nowhere else to turn but to God.

Jabez first prayed to God "Oh, that you would bless me". The way this is written, it is as though "bless me" is written in capital letters and underlined. In other words, Jabez wants God to bless him in every possible way. To us, this can sound selfish and only likely to further the picture of the church as some sort of "bless me" club where people try to cash in on their relationship with God by asking for 6-figure salaries, a BMW, beach-house, etc. This is to misunderstand what blessing is. Blessing is not something that we could get by our own efforts with or without help from God. God loves to bless His people as it shows His generous and loving nature. Look up the word "Blessing" in any concordance. God blesses us with eternal life, the things we need in this life, etc but above all with a relationship with Himself. These are all things which we could not get ourselves. The blessings which God gives us are meant to draw us closer to God and to show the world that God does indeed care for His people. But note how Jabez prays: he leaves all the details up to God. Jabez does not even suggest what blessing he might like or when but trusts that God knows best.

Jabez then prayed "enlarge my territory". He looked at what God had entrusted to him and concluded that he was born for more than that. This is no selfish desire for personal gain from being blessed by God: Jabez wants more so that he can make a bigger mark for God. It is right to ask God that our businesses, our families, our ministries, etc might be more influential for God. The world needs to see good Christian role models. Our expanded spheres of influence are not there to draw people's admiration to us but rather to God. Bruce Wilkinson spoke about the Jabez prayer to the student body and challenged them to think big. In response, two students enthused the rest of the body to trust God and they all chartered a DC-10 and did some significant work for God in Trinidad. It was later described as one of the most significant episodes in the college's history.

Next, Jabez prayed "Let your hand be with me". Having been given extra ministry, we can often wonder how we will fit it all in. We can often add up in our own mind our experiences, skills and make a big subtraction for our faults and set this as the sum total of ministry which God could have for us. This does not allow for God's supernatural ability to provide direction and resources. Once our eyes are off ourselves and onto God, then God is able to

do much through us. A few years ago, Bruce Wilkinson and 12 teen-agers decided to do a children's summer ministry on Long Island, New York. A youth pastor had told them that getting more than a dozen children to the backyard Bible studies, the beach evangelism or the evening outreach would be a smashing success. They decided to aim higher and trust that God would provide. After 6 weeks of allowing God to lead them, they had 1200 children who had decided to follow Christ and the original 12 convinced that God could do anything. If we aim too small, often we do not need God to provide because our natural skill can provide but if we aim for a God-sized target, then unless God comes through, the whole thing will fail.

Lastly, Jabez prayed "keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." Jabez knew that once he started to move with God, he would attract the attention of evil. It is interesting to note how many Christians do not believe in the existence of evil. They take it as a sign of superior spirituality but the real truth is that they are making so little impact for Jesus Christ that evil does not consider them worth opposing. Imagine a person standing in the middle of the Blitz in London in 1940 saying "I don't believe in the reality of Nazi Germany." ! The Lord's Prayer reminds us that

our primary defence against evil is to stay out of the battle: "deliver us from evil" but sometimes we will have to stand against evil for the sake of those oppressed by evil. We need to know God's protection over ourselves and our families and it is ours for the asking. Bruce records a time at the start of his Promise Keepers movement when thousands of men were gathering to renew their covenant with God and yet the atmosphere was so thick with the presence of evil that they could hardly pray. One of the leadership team stood up and proclaimed Christ's victory over evil and the opposition started to melt away.

For someone who started life so inauspiciously, Jabez found a way to the heart of God. These petitions, which sound so self-serving, are actually the pleas which God desires to hear as they glorify God in ways that other prayers do not. Each petition asks God to reveal more of Himself through Jabez and yet at no time, does Jabez ever tell or even suggest to God how God might answer. Jabez leaves that all up to God but places himself entirely at God's disposal. We would do well to follow Jabez's example and I would encourage you all to pray this prayer a few times a day over the next month and let me know what happens. Amen.