

# The Prayer of

# Jabez

A Commentary

Robert E. McAuley

One of the most common justifications for eisegesis, or the art of interpreting Scripture by reading one's own ideas into a text, is to make a good, four-point sermon "preach." Another is not far behind: to create a best-selling book. In a way, Bruce Wilkinson has merged the two in his tiny but handsome bestseller, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Multnomah Publishers, 2000).

Jabez is a character mentioned once in the Bible, amidst a lengthy genealogy, in I Chronicles 4:9-10. "And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, 'Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!' So God granted him what he requested" (NKJV). The author reports that he has recited this prayer daily for 30 years.

It is first necessary to understand that Wilkinson is a firm believer in the supernatural or miraculous, and quite often immediate, answer to prayer. Secondly, it is clear that, while his mind appears to work much like that of a salesman or a promoter, his primary emphasis is on the evangelical uses of prayer. His principal interpretation of Jabez's request that God "enlarge my territory" relates to the spread of the Kingdom through miracles wrought by prayer. It is, thirdly, necessary to say, however, that Jabez was asking God for more business and that it is, therefore, perfectly reasonable, in the Wilkinson system, that business people ask God to bless their businesses and make them successful, provided these people have what in their view is a godly purpose. Further, within the same logic,

one may expect God, in miraculous response, to bless (enlarge, make successful) those businesses whose owners or managers have the faith to ask God's help.

The question which comes to mind is: Why this prayer? Of the many beautiful prayers which one could meaningfully repeat daily for years on end, why select this one? Why make a liturgy of a petition for more property and blessings for *me*? It appears to pale by comparison to any number of biblical prayers: "Create in me a pure heart, O God," or even "Give us this day our daily bread." The prayer of St. Francis is one to which I am drawn regularly: "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace..." Perhaps it is a case of selling the sizzle and not the steak.

Jabez, born in pain, was given a name which in Hebrew sounds like the word for pain, and he doesn't want to cause any further pain. (This latter phrase is translated "so that I will be free from pain," in the NIV, so that even that part of his prayer may be for himself.) He, therefore, asks Jehovah, in the best Jewish tradition, to bless him *extraordinarily*, to keep the divine hand upon him and to keep him from evil. The question is whether this prayer is worthy of imitation simply because it is drawn from the Bible? If so, hear some of the prayers of David, a man considered to be much closer to God than Jabez. Should we imitate these prayers when we run into enemies in business or elsewhere. "May his days be few... his children fatherless, beggars, driven from their homes." "May a creditor seize all that he has... the sin of his mother never he blotted out."

"May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see and their backs be bent forever." "Like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun." "Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave." Now there is a man who knows how to pray and how to enlarge his territory! It is born of ancient Hebrew culture and hardly conforms to the teachings of Jesus Christ, the context in which the author writes.

The Jews, returning from Babylonian exile may have needed to enlarge Judean territories, or Jabez may have been praying, like David, that God help him to gain advantage over his enemies or his neighbors. In neither case would it be proper for Christians to use this verse to justify self-centered, materialistic praying. There are many passages of Scripture which would better serve the missionary and evangelistic purposes of the Jabez prayer to "enlarge my territory," or to reach more souls for Christ. Most of them would be an improvement, in the sense that these petitions of Jabez all ask God's favor for *me*; it is a self-centered prayer entirely, even if it is true that God's blessing of *me* might ultimately result in blessings for others, a sublime rationalization.

If we are going to find biblical prayers for wealth or for the humiliation of our enemies or for power and glory, we shall need to find them in ancient Hebrew literature. The Christian message does not justify selfishness or asking God to bless us as opposed to others. Primarily we are taught to pray for others. The teachings of Jesus are also clearly anti-materialistic. This does not mean that the prayer of Jabez is not useful and poetic as Hebrew

literature. The prayers of David about his enemies, offset by his authorship of some of the most beautiful and inspiring words in literary history, are of great interest in understanding the culture out of which Christianity came; however, clearly, David's ranting prayers asking for retribution upon his enemies clash dramatically with the teachings of Jesus: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:44 NIV).

*The Prayer of Jabez* has its redeeming virtues. Dr. Wilkinson is a far more skillful and enthusiastic communicator of the evangelical message than others better known. We are all hungry for some personal power by which we can positively affect the rest of our lives. Most Christians believe that life in Christ offers us that power. This book offers the reader testimony that there are miraculous short-cuts to that power. The anecdotes are often inspiring. Jabez coffee mugs, bookmarks and plaques detract from the message by supplying illustration of the potential materialistic abuses of the Christian prayer life. And, if the author came and sat beside me on an airplane (where God put him) and asked, as he says he is wont to do, "What can I do for you?" I might well respond: "Did God send you? If so, what did She tell you I needed?"

Promotional quotes on the back cover of the book are headed: "Do you want to be extravagantly blessed by God?" I do want to be blessed by God, but, if it's all the same, I'll take my prayer from the Beatitudes: Bless us Lord, not because we have you in our pockets, but because we want to learn deeper responses to your grace. Bless us when we are poor in spirit, when we mourn, when we are meek, when we hunger and thirst for righteousness, when we are merciful, when we are pure in heart, when we make peace, when we are persecuted because of righteousness (see Matt. 5:3-10 NIV). □



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