

The Prayer of Jabez

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Bible Text: 1 Chronicles 4:9, 10
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Now we'll read verses 9 and 10 and these are the verses for the text of the sermon.

9 And Jabez was more honourable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, Because I bare him with sorrow. 10 And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested.

We read this far in God's holy and inspired word.

These 2 verses, beloved, were popularized about 10 or 15 years ago by a man whose name is Bruce Wilkinson in a book entitled "The Prayer of Jabez," and in that book Wilkinson made 2 main points: 1. to encourage people to pray this prayer daily word-for-word as it's recorded here. To write it down on sticky notes and put it in different places in their house or place of employment where they would encounter it and to pray it regularly and his point in the book is that if you pray this prayer daily, you put God under obligation to answer you and this prayer was turned into a magic formula for receiving the blessing of God, something like praying with rosaries in the Roman Catholic tradition. Then the second thing is that this prayer was interpreted as a request for material blessing, "enlarge my coast," says Jabez. And it's not that Wilkinson himself advocates that prosperity Gospel that has become so popular today but he certainly plays into that mentality and his idea is this: if there's something that you want as a sign of God's love for you, then you pray for that thing and God will demonstrate his love to you by giving you that thing. That will be a sign to you of God's blessing, "Oh that thou wouldest bless me and enlarge my coast."

Now, I don't intend this evening to preach against this book or say much more about the book, instead I want to preach on the text in 2 ways that Wilkinson in his book missed completely and basically that is to preach this text in the broader context of Scripture and in its narrower context here in 1 Chronicles and in the Old Testament. When I say in its broader context, I mean you can't just take this prayer out of this place in Scripture and draw from it all kinds of teachings about prayer and the practice of prayer that are actually contrary to the rest of the Bible's teaching on prayer. For example, this prayer is

not a model or a prayer to be prayed all by itself daily as though this is the key to God's blessing. The Bible doesn't refer to this prayer again anywhere. It doesn't say anything about praying this prayer daily. In fact, Jesus doesn't even give us his model prayer which contains all the elements of prayer, the Lord's Prayer, as a prayer that we are to repeat daily as some kind of magical formula for God's blessing. Prayer is not just in the words that a person says and Jesus warns against vain repetition as the heathen do. Prayer must arise out of faith. Prayer must arise out of understanding so that it's not just a ritual that we go through. Or for example if "enlarge my coast" here is interpreted as praying for material prosperity, then we run into a problem with the other teaching of the word of God which says we shouldn't desire to be rich and we should pray simply for our daily bread and how do you fit those 2 together? You can't take this out all by itself and say that's what prayer is.

So we want to preach this in the context of all of the Bible's teaching on prayer and that's the way Scripture must be treated. God's word must interpret itself and it never is self-contradictory. Then also we also want to look at it in its narrower context that's here in Chronicles and here in the Old Testament Scripture and then we will see that "enlarge my coast" is not a prayer and a pattern and a model for us to pray for material blessing in that God's blessing is not measured by how much he gives to us or how little he gives to us in material things. Instead, God's blessing and grace is much greater and deeper than that and we'll see that from the verse itself.

Now, some things about 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles. The books of Chronicles record the history of the kings of Judah. They are not just a repetition of the books of Kings in order to fill in some gaps that were missed but these 2 books 1 and 2 Chronicles, focus on particularly the kingdom of Judah and the kings of Judah and the line of Christ which is in the kingdom of Judah and they demonstrate to us that though God's people in the nation of Judah are unfaithful, God remains faithful and keeps his promise, the promise to bring Jesus Christ from the seed of Abraham and the seed of David. That's really the point of the genealogies at the beginning of the book. There are 9 chapters that record genealogies and they are kind of like family trees and we read them and they don't mean a lot to us and we can become easily bored with them and flip through, but there are 2 reasons for us to study and to read the genealogies: one is that they show what I just alluded to, the faithfulness of God in preserving a line, the line of Jesus Christ, throughout history despite the sin and the unfaithfulness of his people and you see that in the genealogies here. In chapters 1 through 3, you have a genealogy from Adam, through Abraham and Jacob and the 12 sons of Jacob, the 12 tribes and then more particularly it focuses on the tribe of Judah and then from Judah it goes to David, "And the scepter will not depart from Judah," we're told in Genesis 49, "until Shiloh," that is Christ, "come," and chapter 4 here particularly focuses on the genealogies of Judah to demonstrate that faithfulness of God. But another reason to read these genealogies and to read them through carefully is that in them we find these editorial comments which are gems for our meditation and instruction and that's what we have here in verses 9 and 10, a kind of editorial comment or a distraction for a little while and a focus on one individual in these genealogies and understand, these are not just editorial comments but this is the Holy

Spirit pausing to call attention to an individual and that's what we have here in verses 9 and 10 in Jabez.

Tonight we want to consider these verses under the theme "The Prayer of Jabez." We'll notice first its foundation; second, its content; and then third, its answer. The prayer of Jabez. The foundation for all true prayer is faith in God. If we don't come to God in prayer with faith, then our prayers are merely words. Now, that's certainly what Jesus teaches us and the way the Heidelberg Catechism explains that for us in the very first words of the Lord's Prayer when Jesus teaches us to pray, "Our Father which art in heaven." The Heidelberg Catechism asks this question: why has God commanded us to address God thus, "Our Father"? And the answer is that immediately in the very beginning of our prayer, he may excite in us a childlike reverence for and confidence in God which are the foundation of our prayer, namely that God has become our Father in Christ Jesus and will much less deny us what we ask of him in true faith than our parents will refuse us earthly things. That's the foundation of prayer: faith. God is our Father. God is our Father in Jesus Christ. We are God's children. God will answer our prayer more readily than parents will answer their children when they ask them for something. We come to God in faith and that's the foundation of our prayer.

Now, a prayer of faith has 2 main elements and those 2 main elements we see here in the prayer of Jabez. One is that we come with humility before God acknowledging and confessing our sin; that we come in repentance; that we come as sinners; that we realize our unworthiness; that God is not obligated to draw near to us; that it's a privilege for us to come in prayer. Then the other is that we come trusting in God alone and completely for our salvation. We trust in Jesus Christ. We come in the name of Jesus Christ. We come through his Son and that's the prayer of faith, "I'm a sinner received only by the blood of Jesus Christ." That's what Jesus means when he says, "You pray in my name." That's what the book of Hebrews means when it says, "There is a new and living way open for us through the blood of Jesus Christ." Sinners have no access apart from faith to God.

That's what we see here in Jabez. This is what characterizes his prayer and characterizes the man. He's a man of faith and he prays in faith. You see that first of all in the name that his mother gives to him. She calls him Jabez and she says at the end of verse 9, "Because I bare him with sorrow," and she's obviously referring to the day when he was born and it must have been a painful delivery for her. And the word "Jabez" means "sorrow" or "to cause sorrow or pain." Jabez caused sorrow and pain for her. But in those words, she's acknowledging something that God said much earlier in Scripture and when she says pain in childbirth, she's acknowledging that that pain extends not just to childbirth but to all of life. She's acknowledging the curse of God on a sin-filled world and that this is her lot as a woman and so in Genesis 3:16 we read this that God said to the woman, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." She's saying in essence this: "I recognize that the pain of childbirth is a part of God's wrath resting on a sin-cursed world," and that's a humble acknowledgment of her own sinfulness.

Now, as a believing mother, this is something that she teaches her son by giving him the name Jabez. "Mother, what does my name mean?" "It means sorrow," and then she had opportunity to explain to him all the history of the fall and why there was sorrow in this world and why there was sorrow in the life of her son. Jabez himself acknowledges that. There is a kind of a play on words. You don't get it in the English here but at the very end of Jabez' prayer in verse 10, he says, "I would that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me!" The word there for "grieve" is the word "Jabez," that it may not cause sorrow to me. And Jabez is acknowledging that he himself embraces what his name means and that sin brings grief and when he prays for God to keep him from sin, he's praying for God to keep him from those consequences of sin, the sorrow that sin would bring. And so you have first of all here a man of faith raised in a covenant home, instructed by a believing mother and he embraced that and from a child you see this faith working through in his life.

This faith distinguished Jabez from his brethren in verse 9, "Jabez was more honorable than his brethren." This faith set him apart. He was a man who believed. He stood out as a godly man and a man of belief and a man of faith. Notice it says there he was "more honorable than his brethren." That means that God honored him. He sought the honor not of men as a believer, he didn't live for the praise of men, to be a man-pleaser, but as a man of faith he lived before the face of God just as we are called to do. Think for example of Paul's exhortation in Colossians 3, the believers in the workplace to do their labor diligently, not as men-pleasers but as unto the Lord and Jabez was a man who found his honor with God.

You further see the faith of Jabez in the beginning of verse 10 when we read that "Jabez called on the God of Israel." First of all, this means that Jabez was a man who engaged in regular worship. When it says he "called on God," that doesn't just refer to this prayer and him saying these words. It wasn't that Jabez as a poet wrote these words and he's honored for writing this cute little prayer that he said over and over but Jabez is honored by God as a man who worships God. If you turn back to Genesis 4:26, at the end of the reference there to Seth and the children of Seth, it says, "Then began men to call upon the name of the LORD," and the reference there is to the public gathering of the family of Seth in order to worship God corporately, to call on the name of God that way in a similar way that we would do in our worship. And it's saying this: that Jabez was a man of worship. He called on God with the people of God. There is a man whose faith permeated his life, not just this little prayer.

But now as we look at this, we see the faith of Jabez especially in this that we are told at the beginning of verse 10, he "called on the God of Israel." He was a man who hoped in the promise of Jesus Christ. We are going to see that as we look at the content of his prayer in the second point of this sermon but we see this also in the fact that it says here he "called on the God of Israel." The God of Israel. That means, first of all, that he knew the God of Israel. That he knew the God of Israel in distinction from all the false heathen gods. That he didn't just have a general fuzzy idea about God so that his God was no different than the other gods, some supreme beneficent being but the object of his

worship was clear in his mind and he worshiped the God of Israel exclusively. This was his God. No other gods. Hebrews 11, the great chapter on faith tells us that, "He that cometh to God must believe that he is and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him." It's saying this: that when we come in faith and in prayer by faith to God, we must have a distinct knowledge of God and part of the distinct knowledge of God is that we come to him as he has revealed himself in his word and that is through Jesus Christ alone.

You see that here in Jabez, the God of Israel. Israel. Israel was, first of all, the name that God gave to Jacob after Jacob had wrestled with God at Peniel and sought the blessing of God. In Genesis 32, you can read about this, verses 24 through 32. Jacob wrestled with the angel of Jehovah God all night long, God in a Christophany, a physical appearance. And then God touched him and he was made lame to limp and so Jacob, we read there, held fast to the angel of the Lord and said, "What is your name? And I'm not going to let you go until you bless me." So there was a persistence in the prayer of Jacob there and now Jabez prayed to the God of Israel, the God of Jacob, who was called there a prince with God who prevailed with God. Jabez is a man of prayer. He had, you might say, Jacob as his role model. He wanted to pray like Jacob prayed to the God of Israel and Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me." What was the blessing Jacob sought? Right at that moment, Jacob's life was at risk and Jacob's descendants were at risk of being annihilated by his brother, Esau, who was coming against him. Why did Jacob want the blessing right then? Jacob wanted the blessing right then because included in the blessing was the promise of Christ and if Jacob had the promise of Christ to him in his generation then he knew that God who would keep that promise would also preserve him and his family.

So Jacob sought the blessing because he looked towards Christ and Jabez prayed to the God of Israel. Then Israel, in the second place, was the name of the nation, the people of God, the ones to whom God had made these promises and whom God preserved and in whom the seed of Christ was and the promise of Christ would come from Israel and Jabez prayed to the God of Israel in hope of the coming of Jesus Christ. So this was a prayer, the foundation of which was faith. Faith in the promise. Faith in Jesus Christ and that's so important for us in our prayers too. How can we come to God? How can we be sure that God will hear us when we pray to him? Well, it doesn't depend on the fervency of our prayers. It doesn't depend on the frequency of our petitions. It doesn't depend on the power of our words and petitions but it's as we humbly come in faith through Jesus Christ believing God's promises. As Jesus said, "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in my name believing ye shall receive," and otherwise, God is under no obligation to hear us, to answer us, to give us what we ask. We come in faith in Jesus Christ.

So first, it's foundation and then in the second place: let's look at the content of this prayer and that's what we have in verse 10 and we can identify 4 different petitions that make up the content of the prayer of Jabez. Now, as we look at these, it's important for us to remember them in their context and especially now in their Old Testament context so that we don't misinterpret them and fall into the thinking that this is a pattern or a model of prayer for material prosperity. Notice the words of Jabez. First he says, "Oh that thou

wouldest bless me indeed," and in that, you have an expression of ardent desire as well as devotion to God. He expresses here the longing of his life as well as a commitment to God. I say that because in the Hebrew this is actually in the form of a vow, a vow that a man would make and so what he's really saying here is not, "Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed," but, "If thou wouldest bless me indeed," and then ... He doesn't finish the sentence and the idea is, "If thou wouldest bless me indeed then," and he would make and that's implied here, a promise of devotion and commitment entirely to God.

So you have here an expression of a great desire, an ardent longing for the blessing of God. How we need God's blessing. By nature we are under the curse of God. Without God's blessing our life and labor are vanity and all the sorrows of life are but an expression of the wrath of God against sin. And Jabez, whose name means sorrow, says, "Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed." Now, that's not an unequivocal request for God's blessing that whatever he would ask, God is obligated to give it to him, that he would determine what the blessings are, rather Jabez doesn't identify the blessings here. He leaves that to God. God will define and describe what the blessings are.

So that's the first petition. Then the second petition of Jabez here is: "and enlarge my coast." Now obviously, Jabez is praying here in connection with his portion or his inheritance in the Promised Land of Canaan and that tells us something about the time when he prayed this. It would have been during the time that Israel was coming into the Promised Land or some time between then and the time of David when Israel was entering into its possession and the enemy still inhabited the land and the enemies had to be driven out, the enemies who were God's enemies. The enemies who Jabez would have recognized as those who were under the wrath of God. And it was Israel's calling to destroy them because they weren't only physical enemies on their territory but they were spiritual enemies of God and his people and their presence posed a spiritual threat to God's people and so they had to be driven out of the land and destroyed and he's praying for that here. It's a spiritual request.

Then when he prays for his portion and the enlarging of his coast in that portion, he's speaking of the Promised Land and we know that the Promised Land, the physical Canaan that was given to Israel, was but a type and a picture and promise to the people of their place in the heavenly kingdom so that in Hebrews 11 we read that Abraham, though he was promised all the land and didn't receive any of it, still lived by faith, not just in receiving his portion in that land of Canaan but he looked for a city that had foundations whose builder and maker was God. That's the prayer of faith of Jabez here. It's a prayer not for prosperity but for victory over the enemies, for protection from temptation, for hope and continued longing for his place in heaven and for his final place in glory.

That's the prayer it is for us when we pray that God will enlarge our coast. That's not a prayer for prosperity and material possessions. That's not a prayer for a BMW or a prayer for something else that's going to make me look affluent and feel important and pleased and happy with something material. But it's a prayer for our place with God's people in glory to come and a prayer that God will give us victory over the spiritual enemies along the way that would prevent our coming to glory. It's a prayer against the devil and the

world and our sinful flesh and temptation. This is the prayer of a Christian soldier who understands the enemy and says, "Lord, enlarge my coast. Give me victory in the battles with sin."

So that is his second petition. Then third in the content of his prayer, "that thine hand might be with me." In that petition, Jabez expresses his utmost dependence on God. God's hand is a hand that strengthens and a hand that guides. Jabez acknowledges his own weakness and his own folly. He is not strong and he needs guidance and he asks God to support him and to lead him, that God's hand might be with him. And how we need not just the blessing of God but the hand of God in our lives. We are weak, especially in the temptations against sin. Especially in the struggle that our spiritual coast might be enlarged. Jesus says, "Without me ye can do nothing." We need the guiding and the supporting hand of God and so we pray, "that thine hand might be with me."

Then that petition is further expanded in the fourth petition here, "that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it might not grieve me." Evil is not just bad things that happen in your life but evil refers to sin. This is the word that's used in the Scripture in reference to sin. And Jabez is acknowledging here not only the dominion and the power of sin but the dreadful consequences of sin. He finds no delight in sin and he realizes that when he falls into sin that only brings grief and sorrow into his life. The world finds its pleasure in sin. It presents sin as attractive and enjoyable. That's what temptation is but he prays against temptation and he prays against the sad consequences, to be protected from the sad consequences of sin. This is the prayer, the request that Jesus teaches us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," that God would turn our hearts from finding pleasure in sin and find our fullness and pleasure in him.

So that's the content of this prayer. Far from material. And not just a prayer to be prayed in these words but a pattern for our prayers as we think through and meditate on the requests that are made here. Then we pray that God will bless us in our lives. Then we pray with regard to our eternal possession and place in heaven, that God would preserve us and bring us there. We pray for God to give us victory over our spiritual enemies. We confess our weakness and absolute dependence on him and ask for his hand to strengthen and to guide and we ask that God would turn our hearts from sin to find our joy in him and sorrow in sin.

So that's the content of Jabez' prayer. Then finally we have here the answer to this prayer at the end of verse 10, "And God granted him that which he requested." That is, God blessed him. He prayed, "Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed." God blessed him. God blessed him by giving him victory over his enemies. God blessed him by enlarging his coast. By giving him a place in the Promised Land with the people of God and then that gave him his possession in Jesus Christ and his hope of glory, a picture of those things. God blessed him by saving him in salvation and all the blessings of salvation. God not only blessed him in salvation but God blessed him by preserving him. God gave him the daily strength that he asked for, "that thine hand might be with me." God kept him from evil, from sin by his grace so that the prayer that David made, "Keep me back from presumptuous sin," was answered in the life of Jabez. God preserved him as an honorable

man. A man of faith. A man with a spiritual legacy. A man who stood out in his godliness. God granted him that which he requested.

What we see here is this: God is a God who indeed answers the prayers of his people and that's the wonderful promise of all the word of God. Listen to these words in Jeremiah 33:3, "Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not." Or the words of Jesus, "Ask and it shall be given. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened." The point is this: that God is a God who pays attention to the needs and the prayers of his people and he will answer our prayers even beyond our expectations. He's able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or think. But that does not mean that God is under obligation to give us whatever we ask. It does not mean that the more ardently we pray for something, the more likely we are to receive it. No, sometimes God doesn't answer our prayers by giving us what we want or we ask and that could be because we ask with sinful motives. We don't ask in faith. James 4:3, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss," that is, it's a wrong request and it comes with the wrong motive. "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." You're asking for something that will satisfy your desires rather than asking and praying according to God's will and for his glory.

Then other times, God doesn't answer our prayers because God has something else in mind than what we ask, something different, something better. Think of Paul. Paul had a thorn in the flesh. We don't know what it was that's figurative of some difficult trial that he bore in his life and he asked God to remove it. He prayed fervently that God would remove it but God's answer to him was no. Was that because Paul didn't ask enough? No. Was that because God wasn't blessing Paul? A sign of God not blessing him, withholding his blessing? No. Paul says, 2 Corinthians 12:9, that this was God's answer, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." Paul says, "Most gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." He means this: that God answered his prayer in an unexpected way by giving him a richer experience of God's grace and that the trial, the tribulation he had, brought that experience to him. Without it, he wouldn't have known. So Paul says in another place that he glories in tribulation because tribulation causes spiritual maturity. Tribulation works patience and patience works experience and experience works hope and hope doesn't make ashamed. Paul is saying this: "We glory in our trials because God is drawing us to him and drawing us to heaven and causing our hearts to find a pleasure in something far greater and richer than earthly things."

So we can say this: God doesn't answer our prayers with what we want but God answers our prayers with what we truly need and he's a God who knows our needs and we're like children who sometimes don't know what's best for them and so we don't always ask what we should or we ask according to our sinful desires and it's not that God doesn't answer or that God doesn't give us what we need but he gives us something better for us. That's the point of Jesus in Luke 11:13. I find this to be one of the most surprising diversions in all of Scripture. Jesus is giving there the parable or the illustration of a father being asked by his son for an egg or for bread or for fish and then he says the

father won't give to him for those things a snake or a stone. Then he says this in verse 13, "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give," and then we might expect him to say, "what you ask." Just as a son asks bread and receives bread and not a stone. A son asks for a fish and he doesn't get a scorpion. A son asked for an egg and he doesn't get a snake. He gets what he asked. That's not the way Jesus concludes his instruction there on prayer. He says, "If ye then, being evil," sinners, "know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give," not what you ask but, "the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" That's grace. That's far and beyond what we can ask or think. The power and presence of God himself. The Holy Spirit. The hand of God that Jabez asked for to be with him and to strengthen him and to guide him and to keep him from evil. God answers prayer and he answers it beyond our expectations.

So let's learn to pray like Jabez, not the Jabez of the book that was so popular years ago but the Jabez of the Bible. A man of faith. A man who hoped in the promises of heaven. A man who depended on God. A man who confessed his weakness. A man who understood the sorrow that sin brought. A man who prayed for preservation from sin. A man whose requests were spiritual. A man who prayed in accord with God's will. A man who prayed in faith in the promise of Jesus Christ. And when we pray like Jabez, God will indeed bless us and answer our prayers. "Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested." Amen.

Father, we thank thee for the beautiful instruction here on prayer and we thank thee that the Bible has so much to say about this aspect of our life as Christians and that we have such ready access through Jesus Christ to thee. We pray that thou would hear and answer and direct our spirits more and more to pray in this way, recognizing spiritual enemies, spiritual blessings and great answers in the grace that we receive through prayer. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.